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RANCH ROMANCES

25c

A THRILLING PUBLICATION
SECOND MARCH NUMBER

FEATURING

MANHUNTER
by Kenneth L. Sinclair

COWMAN'S DAUGHTER
by Ed La Vanway

RANCH FLICKER TALK
By The Famous Movie And TV Star
BOB CUMMINGS

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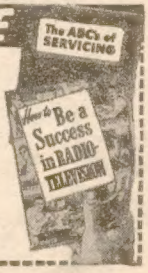

32nd Year
OF PUBLICATION

SECOND
MARCH NUMBER

March 9, 1956
Volume 197, No. 1

RANCH ROMANCES

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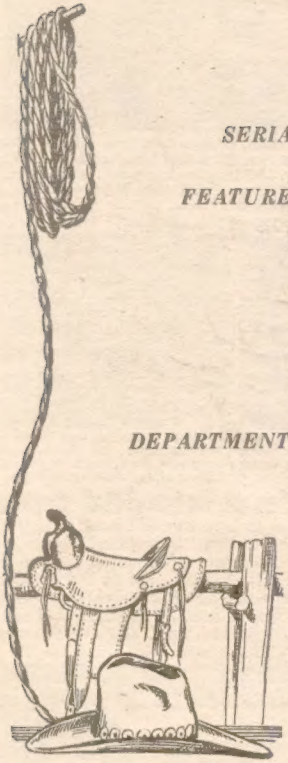

HELEN TONO
Editor

RANCH ROMANCES issued bi-weekly by Literary Enterprises, Inc., 1125 E. Vaile Ave., Kokomo, Ind. N. L. Pines, President. Entered as Second Class matter at the Post Office at Kokomo, Ind., under Act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25c; Yearly subscription, $5.00; add 80c for Canadian, $1.50 for foreign and Pan-American subscriptions. Editorial and Executive Offices, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Title registered as Trade Mark in U. S. Patent Office. Copyright 1956 by Literary Enterprises, Inc. Printed in the U.S.A. The names of all persons in fiction stories in this magazine have no reference to any person living or dead. Ranch Romances does not assume responsibility for safe return of unsolicited manuscripts.

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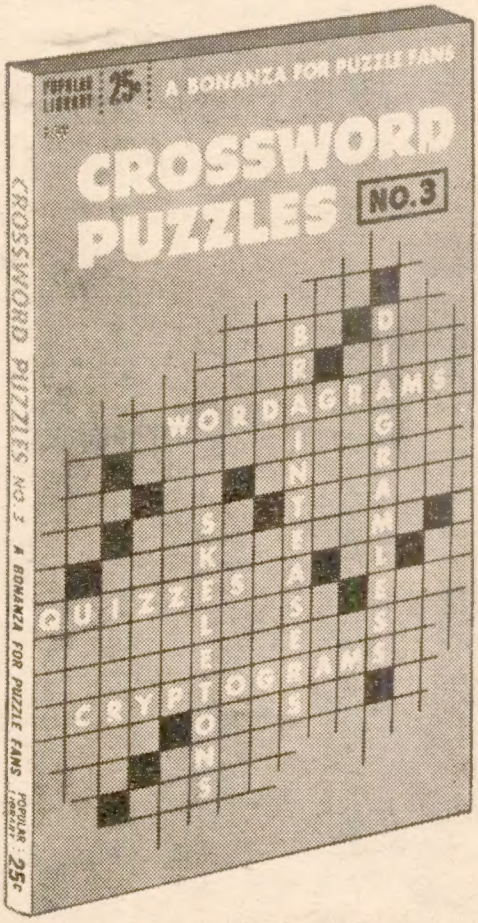
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Two Airman in Okinawa

Dear Editor:

We are two airmen on Okinawa, and mail sure helps our morale over here. Therefore, we would appreciate any letters sent our way. Boyd has brown hair, blue eyes, is 5′ 7″ tall and is 20 years old. Robert has brown hair, gray eyes, is 5′ 5½″ tall, and is 22 years old. We will answer all letters and will exchange snapshots.

a/2c ROBERT E EVANS
AF13443095, Box 96
a/2c BOYD McCARTY
AF15510747, Box 218
18th Supply Sqdn.
APO 239 San Francisco, California

Bouncy Female

Dear Editor.

How about putting my letter on the Air Mail page so I may have some pen pals? I am 16 years old, 4′11″ tall, with brown hair and green eyes. I like to ride horses, dance, and write letters. I would especially like to hear from servicemen and from boys and girls from other countries, but I will also answer letters from the good old USA.

BETTY PHILLIPS
Box 74
Roy, Montana

From Trieste, Italy

Dear Editor:

Today I found the book RANCH ROMANCES and read the column about correspondents. I don't know if "Our Air Mail" is for people all over the world, but if it is, and you put my name in it, you will make me very happy. I am 20 years old, tall, with green eyes and brown hair. I would like to write to boys from 20 to 30 years of age.

ELEONORA LIRSTICH
Viscolo del Castougneto N 158
Trieste, Italy

Lonely Californian

Dear Editor:

I would like it very much if you publish my letter, as I am a regular reader of yours. I am a lonely man of 65, 5′7″ tall, and weigh 140 lbs. I am of German descent. I am on a pension, but I am still able to work. I wish that I could make the acquaintance of some lady who lives on a ranch as I am interested in ranch living.

DON G. WILKELM
3263 Logan Avenue
San Diego 13, California

Shy Sixteen

Dear Editor:

I have been an avid reader of RANCH ROMANCES for some time now, and would like to have pen pals. I am 16 years old, 6′ 2″ tall, weigh 163 lbs., and have brown hair and blue eyes. Would like to hear from anyone, so come on and fill a very empty mailbox.

ROGER BLIX
Star Route
Brookston, Minnesota

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 31 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Canadian Cowboy

Dear Editor:

Can a Canadian prairie dweller borrow some space to plead for Western pen pards? I am a 28-year-old bachelor, neither rich nor handsome, who wants to exchange friendly letters with young ladies. I am of Scotch descent, 6′ tall, weighing 195 lbs., with very dark brown hair and blue eyes I'm good-natured and friendly and enjoy sports movies, music and all clean honest fun.

DONALD CLARKSON
Suite 5, 278 Laura Street
Winnipeg 2, Manitoba
Canada

Jamaican Friend

Dear Editor:

I would like to correspond with pen pals from the United States, so will you please include my request on your pen-pal page? I am 17 years old, 5′ 5″ tall, and tip the scales at 115 lbs. In Kingston I attend the Convent of Mercy Academy Commercial School. My favorite hobbies are dancing, swimming, reading and stamp collecting.

VALERIE LONG
4 Fontenoy Road
Vireyard Town
Kingston, Jamaica

Down on the Farm

Dear Editor:

I live on a small farm but I work for a lumber and coal company. I am 40 years old, 5′ 11″ tall, weigh 176 lbs., and have brown curly hair and gray eyes. I like hillbilly music, and Hank Williams is my favorite singer. I will send a photo to all those that answer my letter. Come on, all you girls, I'm still single.

WARFIELD E. SHIPLET
P.O. Box 226,
Coatesville, Pa.

Wants Lasting Friends

Dear Editor:

I am a very lonesome fellow who wants to establish lasting and true friendships with some nice girls between the ages of 16 and 21. I am 23 years old, weigh 150 lbs., am 6′ 1½″ tall, and have light

brown hair and blue eyes. My hobbies are collecting stamps and coins. My ambition is to become a TV technician and also to study commercial art. So come on girls, and get yourselves a good friend.

ALLAN MITCHELL
1900 So. 10th Street W.
Missoula, Montana

Canadian Contact

Dear Editor:

I read RANCH ROMANCES quite often, and I hope you will put my name in your Air Mail page. I am a Canadian who wishes to correspond with people in the U.S.A. I'm sixteen years old, 5' 5" tall, weigh 118 lbs., and have dark hair and hazel eyes.

SHIRLEY GREEN
General Delivery
Quesnel, B. 6
Canada

Navy Career Man

Dear Editor:

I am a sailor who was raised in the back woods of Arkansas and joined the Navy for a career. I have six years to go before I retire. I'm in my early thirties, am 6' tall, and have dark hair and gray eyes. Wonder if some lonely woman or widow would care to sail the seas with me? I will answer all letters promptly, and will exchange photos.

LON BROWN GRAHAM B M 3
USS Whetstone LSD 27
c/o Fleet Post Office
San Francisco, California

Likes Older People

Dear Editor:

I would like to receive mail from women and unattached men between the ages of 35 and 55. I have brown hair and blue eyes. I am a regular church goer, and like to read and sew. I have never been married. I would enjoy letters very much.

LILLIAN MARSHALL
1519 W. Market Street
Louisville 3, Kentucky

Lonely Student

Dear Editor:

Will you please print my letter? I am a student at the Indiana State School for the Blind. My mother will help me answer every letter I receive. I get very lonely, and cannot play as other children do. I love dogs and cats. I will soon be 10 years old. Won't all you wonderful people write to me?

BOBBY SHANER
R.R. 1
Winchester, Indiana

Motorcycle Fan

Dear Editor:

I would like to have my name in your Air Mail column. I am 5'10" tall and weigh 160 lbs. I have dark brown hair and eyes. I am 23 years old and I'm pretty quiet, except that my favorite pastime is riding my motorcycle.

MELVIN THOMAS
507 N. Mulbery
McPherson, Kansas

Little Girl From Little Rock

Dear Editor:

This is my first try to get into your column. I am 17 years old and have dark brown hair. I like all sports, and just love animals. I would like to hear from boys between the ages of 17 and 21 who live all over the country. I will exchange photos.

JUNE DUCKWORTH
83 Highland Circle
Little Rock, Arkansas

Sisters

Dear Editor:

We are two sisters who wish to receive some mail. We like to skate and dance. We both play the piano, and Charlene also plays the saxophone. Charlene is 15 years old and is a sophomore in high school. Sharon is almost 17 years old. We promise to answer all mail.

SHARON & CHARLENE HELGESON
Box 2000, Axton Road
Billingham, Washington

Interested in People

Dear Editor:

I think your column is an excellent opportunity to meet people from all over the world. I am 18 years old, have long black hair and gray eyes, am 5'4" tall, and weigh 122 lbs. My primary interest is people, and I will write to anyone who writes to me.

NANCY PETROVICH
1410 17th Street
Galveston, Texas

Soldier Overseas

Dear Editor:

I don't receive very much mail, so I hope that someone will answer my prayer and write to me. I am a soldier stationed on Okinawa, 24 years old, with dark brown hair and hazel eyes. My home is in Portsmouth, Ohio. Please let me hear from you.

CPL. HOMER E. MARTIN, RA 15259662
SVC Co. 75th R.C.T. Ft. Buckner
APO 331 San Francisco, California

All-Around Guy

Dear Editor:

This is my first try, and I would appreciate it if you would print my letter in your column. I am very lonely and would like to hear from girls 17 to 21. I am 5' 5", weigh 120 lbs., have brown hair and blue eyes. As far as my interests go, I like to do almost anything. I will also exchange snaps.

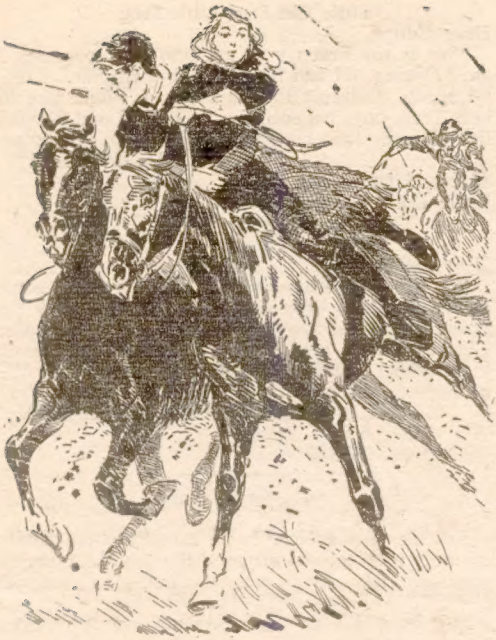
GERALD BURKE
General Delivery
Craig, Colorado

Ex-Serviceman

Dear Editor:

I have only been out of the service a month. I am 38 years old, 5' 10" tall, weigh 150 lbs., with blue eyes and brown wavy hair. I will be glad to exchange pictures with anyone who writes. I like all sports, and dancing.

AL MARTIN
614 Capitol Street
Vallejo, California



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TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found them. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

IT WAS a whirlwind marriage for an Indianapolis, Ind., couple, because the groom made the mistake of telling the bride, while they were taxi-ing home after the wedding, that he expected her to rise early every morning to cook his breakfast. The bride just rode on out of the groom's life, presumably forever.

PIGEONS in Chicago, Ill., are growing themselves a corn crop on a church roof right in the big city. When corn stalks were found in a rain gutter near a pigeon's nest, the minister guessed that kernels of corn must have been dropped by the birds into the dirt in the gutter, and had taken root.

"NEXT time keep your safe and back door locked. Ha! Ha!" read the note left by a burglar after he had carried off a successful theft in a Hillsboro, N. D., factory.

THE PRISONER, charged with burglary, carried a large Bible when he was escorted into a Houston, Tex., courtroom. "I've found religion," he explained. Unmoved, the jury sentenced him to 12 years' imprisonment. So he tore the Bible to shreds after he left the courtroom.

WHEN bloodhounds followed the trail of an escaped convict in Allen, Okla., police thought the prisoner's recapture was a sure thing. They learned later—after the convict had made good his escape and had apparently taken the dogs with him—that his prison duty had been handling the bloodhounds.

A WOMAN in Cleveland, O., went to mail a letter, but dumped her pet cat into the mail box instead. After postal authorities had rescued the cat, the woman explained that she "must have become confused." The cat, no doubt suffering from confusion too, made no comment.

TWO pairs of overalls were stolen from an advertising display in front of a clothing store in Bedford, Ia., but the sheriff is afraid to investigate. The overalls would cover a mighty big thief; they're 9 feet around the waist and 14 feet long.

STATE prison officials in Angoia, La., are going to find a different job for one convict. They had handed him a can of paint, a brush, and a stencil reading "General Hospital." Later they found the words painted on walls, doors, desks, beds, tables, and two sleeping patients.

A 5-YEAR-OLD called Long Beach, Calif., police to say, "Help me. I dreamed dragons were chasing me." Police told him to "call if they come back, and we'll send St. George and the dragon Squad."

WHILE two policemen were breaking up a fight in a Montreal, Can., bar, someone sneaked outside and stole their radio car.

RANCH
FLICKER TALK

by movie editor BOB CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

TOP GUN

A lively chapter of Old West history comes to life again in United Artists' realistic and exciting new movie

IN 1870 Casper, Wyoming, was proud of being a fast-growing town. They welcomed all comers except one. And just so there would be no doubt about it in that fellow's mind, they dug a grave, left it open, and put up a sign reading, "Reserved for Rick Martin."

That's the part Sterling Hayden plays in a new Western, *Top Gun,* which will soon be released by United Artists.

The picture opens with Rick staring at this sign, knowing that he has to go into the town where everyone hates him to save the people from a gang of raider.

Karen Booth plays the girl Rick loves, even though she too has lost faith in him and has promised to marry his bitterest enemy, the town's leading citizen. William Bishop plays this wily villain, and two screen veterans, James Millican and Regis Toomey, round out a fine cast of stars.

The story is based on history, for Casper was really one of the towns attacked by a band of marauders after the civil war. Great pains were taken to make the movie as realistic as possible; and considerable research was done concerning the early history of the town.

One interesting item revealed was that Casper barely escaped destruction by Indians just five years before it was captured by the raiders who are shown in *Top Gun.*

From 1847 until 1865 it was called Mormon Crossing, boasting first a ferry and then a bridge across the North Platte River. By 1865 travelers other than Mormons must have been crossing the river, because the townspeople wanted to change the name.

The opportunity came to rechristen themselves and also to do honor to a hero, when a Lieutenant Caspar Collins was killed defending the place from the Indians. From then on the settlement was called Casper. (The pioneers' spelling was wrong, but their intentions were all right.)

Anyway, it is this dangerously situated little town that has been reproduced to the life in *Top Gun.* The movie set was built in Hollywood, since modern Casper is far too big and bustling today to look like a frontier settlement.

Construction included a general store, church, blacksmith shop, hotel, saloon, hash house, granary and several houses, as well as the above-mentioned boot hill. The set cost $152,000 to build, though the chances are in 1865 you could have had Casper delivered to you gift-wrapped for $2,000.

Top Gun is an action picture, of course, but there's a lot more mood and realism in it than in many action films. You feel the threat and tension in the atmosphere even when the camera is only panning over the scenery. Everything has a dark, brooding look, which the producer and director achieved by shooting on cloudy days.

The location was actually in the rugged Topango Canyon area in Southern California, which is noted for its sunshine, though occasionally there's "a most unusual day," when the weather is cloudy or even downright wet.

It was these unusual days that Producer Edward Small and Director Ray Nazarro were hoping for. They could scan the horizon for a cloud, and beam when they saw one, which astonished the cast and crew.

"We wanted realism," Ed Small told me, "and that meant all kinds of weather. We used lenses and filters and non-glamorous lighting and all kinds of tricks to get a somber, menacing atmosphere."

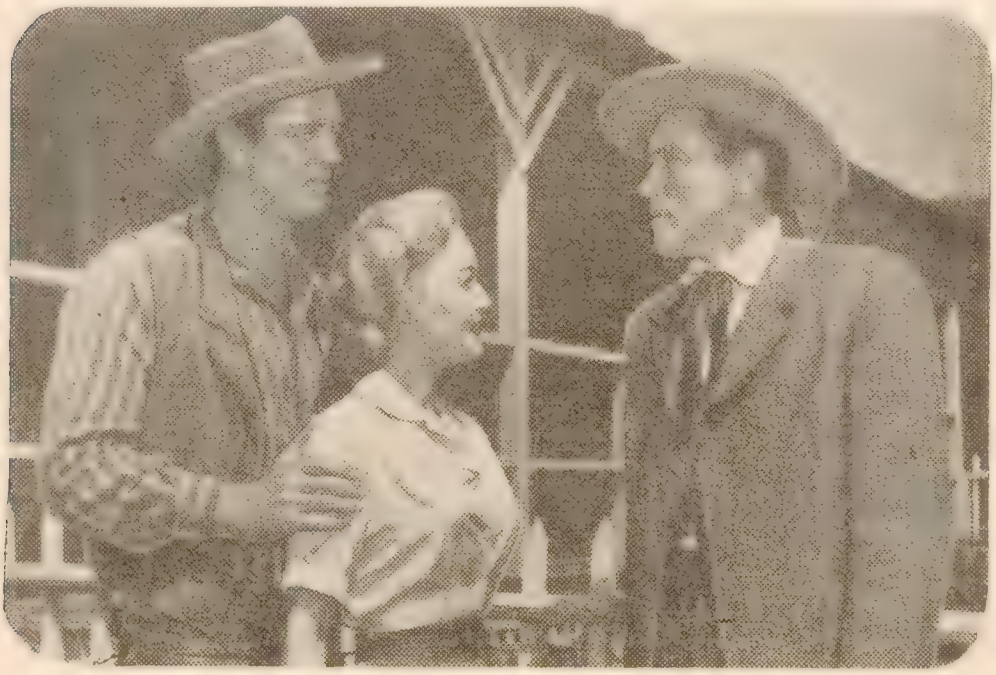
"We actually felt lucky to have an overcast," added Ray, "because we wanted to reproduce the light and shadow mood of real life."

There's one thing in the movie that's not realistic, though. In fact, it qualifies as a movie boner, but even though it was discovered immediately it was left in.

It's Sterling Hayden's grave, which was dug five feet long for a fellow who stands (or lies) six feet four. The reason the size of it wasn't stretched to fit is that when Sterling saw it in the first scene, he ad libbed one line.

"I guess they must have expected me to die young."

The director liked the line so much he left it in, which meant that the undersized grave stayed in too.



Sterling Hayden and Karin Booth confront William Bishop

ANTHONY QUINN
Colorful Star

SOME people in Hollywood say that it's harder to get your second part in the movies than your first one. Anthony Quinn is one who firmly holds this opinion, and he probably holds the record for the longest lapse of time between the two.

He played his first part when he was four and his next one twenty years later. And it wasn't that his first role was such an unpleasant experience that he didn't want to repeat it. In fact he had a fine time romping around in nothing but a bearskin in an old silent jungle thriller, and the acting bug bit him hard, but it was a long time before he could gratify his ambition again.

Maybe I'd better begin at the beginning, because it's an interesting story. Tony was born in Mexico, the son of an Irish adventurer and an Aztec princess. When the lad was only two, the family came to El Paso, Texas, after a warning by Pancho Villa himself that war would soon break out.

The Quinns drifted westward until they reached Los Angeles, where Frank, Tony's father, found himself a job with just the right mixture of adventure and steadiness to suit him.

One day he wandered into the Selig Zoo, where Colonel Selig was taking advantage of his collection of animals (which the public had lost interest in visiting) to film jungle hair-raisers. On that day the cameraman failed to show up; and Col. Selig told Frank to get behind the machine and crank.

Frank learned fast, and even dreamed up a part for his son to supplement the family income. And Tony might have become the Jackie Coogan of his day, if his father had not died soon afterward.

So the boy's debut was forgotten almost as soon as it happened. But Tony didn't forget the movies. All through school he acted in plays and took drama courses; afterward he worked in stock companies. Finally, armed with a with a letter from Col. Selig, whom few people remembered any more, he began haunting the studio casting offices. Somehow he got in a gangster picture at Universal.

"I don't think the letter had much to do with it," says Tony. "After all, the Colonel couldn't say much more than that I'd looked fetching in a bearskin when I was four. I guess it was my big ugly mug that sold me."

Since then it has been Tony's excellence as an actor that has sold him. He has played in some sixty movies, several stage shows, and countless television plays. Usually his parts are somewhat bizzare. He has played dozens of Indians and Spaniards, naturally, because of his Mexican-Indian background and his fluent Spanish. He's been Chinese, Javanese, Hawaiian, speaking a few words in these languages, and grunting mysteriously in what he hoped was an imitation of others.

His career has been widespread and colorful, but his own adult life is as private and wholesome as he can make it. In 1937 he married Cecil B. DeMille's beautiful adopted daughter Katherine, who gave up her promising career to devote herself to Tony and their family. Tragedy touched them when their first child died, but they now have a happy brood of four children, ranging in age from 14 down to 3.

He's a voracious reader and an accomplished painter, and has had one-man showings of his works. Riding is his only outdoor sport. He has concentrated on becoming an expert horseman ever since he played in his first Western, back in 1936.

This movie was DeMille's *The Plainsman*—his lucky picture, he calls it. He met Katherine on that set, which provided the romance of his life; and he got his first good part, which settled his career for life.

20th Century-Fox

Tony caught the acting urge as a child, and has never lost it

MANHUNTER

By KENNETH L. SINCLAIR

JOHN VAIL WANTED to build a new future for himself . . . but a vengeful woman had made up her mind he wouldn't live that long

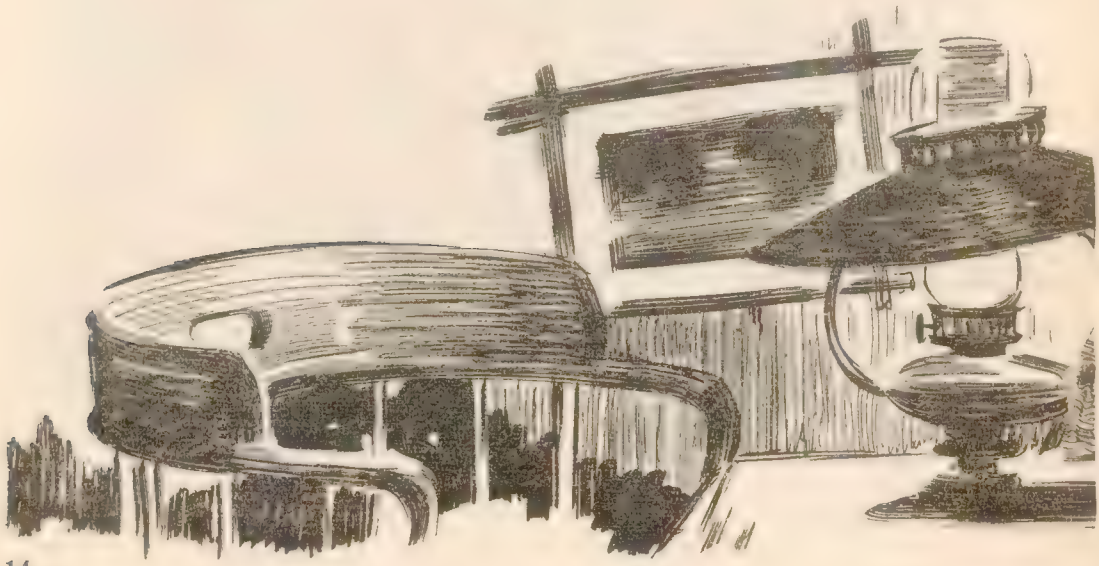
THE kid was fishing from the little bridge that crossed Peralta Creek, right in the middle of the town. He was about ten years old, barefooted, wearing patched overalls that had become too small for him a long time ago. He scrambled to his feet when John Vail's horse clopped across the bridge, and squinted tightly against the sun as he looked up at the big, grave man on the black horse.

"Gee," the kid said in awed tones, "you're Mr. Vail!"

"That's my name. What's yours, son?"

"Lonnie Newton. I saw you when you were here before, Mr. Vail."

"Want to earn a dollar, Lonnie?"



Vail slanted his glance away from the eagerly nodding youngster, looking toward the bank. The big front window had been replaced since the shooting. The new glass hadn't gotten dingy enough, as yet, to keep him from seeing that Sam Follis's white head was peering out. The banker was acting a little nervous in there; he too had recognized John Vail and knew what was coming.

Vail took an old envelope from the inside pocket of his coat. After scrawling some words upon it with the stub of a pencil, he handed it down to the kid.

"Watch when I get inside the bank. When I wave—like this—you take this paper over to the telegraph office. Got that, Lonnie?"

"Sure, Mr. Vail. Gee, thanks." A skinny, sun-browned hand captured the silver dollar that Vail tossed to him.

Kids didn't know, Vail thought, as he rode on off the bridge and followed the street along which stood the buildings of the main part of town. He could get along with kids, though with their elders it was a different mattter. Reining in at the front of the bank, he stepped down from his saddle and tied his horse.

The horse was big, like its rider, a fast black with plenty of bottom, a valuable animal wearing gear that was well-kept and of the finest quality. Behind the cantle of the saddle was a tight bedroll, neatly secured in cavalry style.

When he crossed the worn little porch and entered the bank, Vail saw that Sam Follis had given up his vantage point at the window and had retreated behind the counter. Follis was alone there now.

"Well, well!" There was a gusty, forced geniality in the banker's tone. "Glad to see you again, Vail."

Like hell you are, Vail thought. This Follis was a big man too, but one made heavy by good living. He was about sixty, with a flowing mane of white hair and a black string tie, a banker's air of smug prosperity, and a beefy face that seemed even redder than usual now. Unsmiling, Vail put his hands on the counter edge.

"I just finished the trip to Yuma, friend."

"Fine, fine. Karns didn't give you any trouble, eh?"

"No trouble. That reward was for arrest and conviction, as I recall. I gave you good measure by taking Karns to Yuma myself."

Follis moved back a step. He wasn't liking this at all. "You were well paid by the Territory, Vail. Salary and expenses, eh? Anything extra is just— How about a hundred or so?"

"Five thousand was the amount, friend. You named it, I didn't. Your man's where you wanted him, in prison. So now pay up."

The banker's pale eyes held a trapped anger, but he didn't let it get into his voice. "Let's be reasonable about this, Vail. That reward offer was made in the heat of the moment. The bank had been robbed and my teller was lying dead. I didn't stop to think."

"You mean that you never intended to pay off. You were just putting on a show, trying to be the big man around here. Karns had escaped and you didn't think he'd be caught. If he were, you'd find some way to welch out of paying. I've met your sort before, friend, and never had much use for them. Maybe you haven't met my kind, though. It's a dollars-and-cents proposition with me; when I finish the job I collect my pay."

"There was nothing definite about the reward offer."

"It was given out to the public, and published in the paper here and in others all over the Territory."

A crafty look came into Follis's eyes. "You made a mistake in coming back here, Vail," he said fatuously. "Mrs. Karns had been expecting you to come for the reward money, I think. She's been in town ever since the trial, staying at the hotel and spending most of her time on the porch, watching the street. Why?"

"It's none of my concern, friend."

"It might be. It's costing her more than she can afford, staying here in town like that. I'd say that she wants to make sure you don't slip in and out again without her seeing you. The storekeeper tells me that she bought a little gun and put it into her purse. She's a determined young woman, Vail, and she claims you framed her husband. Remember, it was you who brought him in, you who found the bank's money on him, you who testified

against him. A woman's bullet can kill you just as dead as any, Vail."

"You've scared me," Vail said, keeping his steady regard on the banker.

Follis toyed with the gold watchchain that crossed his vest. "I've warned you about her. That ought to be worth something."

"It's not worth a nickel," Vail cut in roughly.

Follis scowled at him. "All right, Vail. You're a tough one—that's your stock in trade—but it doesn't buy you a thing here. There's no law that says a reward has to be paid on any certain terms. Better take the two hundred and get out before Mrs. Karns recognizes that black horse of yours."

JOHN VAIL checked an urge to laugh. This Follis was like a lot of others; a flabby, gutless sort who coasted along on the strength of his position in life. But there was a certain sly basis for his last-ditch defiance of Vail. Nobody could force the payment of a reward, unless maybe local public opinion. And in the case of John Vail that wouldn't help much.

Vail was known over the entire Territory as a manhunter. Some had worse names for him than that. When he was needed they sent for him, but the way of his life didn't lead men to like him, and he had never sought to curry favor. He was a man who had set himself apart from all others, and if this banker foxed him the people around Peralta would only snicker over it and let it go at that.

Vail turned, walked over to the big window, and lifted his hand in signal to the kid on the bridge. The boy sprinted along the other side of the creek, running toward the telegraph office which was over there, carrying the envelope in his hand.

Follis leaned across the counter, straining to see. "What's this? He's going into the telegraph. Vail, did you send him with some sort of message?"

"You've had your chance, friend," Vail said. "A lot of bankers, I've found, have a way of dipping into the bank's money now and then. One who's been robbed might be inclined to pad the amount of his loss, to cover up some of his own shortages and keep his stockholders from finding out about them. There's a new law in the Territory now, setting up a board of bank examiners. When they get into a bank's books they find—"

"Damn you!" Follis said through twitching lips. "You've sent word to them." He lifted his pale eyes, scanning Vail's face and finding no mercy there. "Why didn't you warn me about what you planned?"

"I never tell a man what I'm going to do, friend."

White faced now, Follis darted around the end of the counter and ran heavily to the door and on out of the bank. In a moment he was pounding across the bridge. When Follis disappeared within the telegraph office, John Vail took a cheroot from his pocket, lighted it, and stepped out onto the bank's porch for a moment.

He stood there, waiting, with no particular feeling of anxiety or anything else. He was a six-footer with a frame built big and broad, wearing a broadcloth coat, whipcord riding pants, and boots of a quality that few men could afford. His face was strongly chiseled, holding a certain aloof confidence that men envied and that women of the bolder sort sometimes took as a challenge.

Today was September 28, 1890. Vail remembered the date because it was exactly one week past his birthday. At thirty, a man should stop and take stock of what he had accomplished thus far, and decide where he was headed. John Vail, the manhunter, had made himself feared. He had done things that somebody had had to do, hitting the lawless ones ruthlessly, so that the legitimate business of this frontier land could go on with its building of a better life for everybody.

The trouble was, that built nothing for John Vail himself. He had made a lot of money, and had thrown it away on plush, riotous living. The trouble with his way of life was that it didn't lead him anywhere at all.

Smiling thinly, he watched Follis come out of the telegraph office and make his way along the path to the bridge. Then, guardedly aware of movement somewhere on this side of the creek, Vail glanced down the street and saw

that a young woman had come out onto the porch of the hotel and had stopped short, looking at him.

She was fairly tall and slim, and gravely somber in manner. She was a mighty beautiful woman, though, beautiful in a way Vail couldn't define. She was Julia Karns. Vail had seen her at her husband's trial, and he had been aware of the fixed hatred in her dark eyes every time she had looked at him.

The trial had been held in Bisbee, after Karn's lawyer had insisted that his client couldn't get a fair shake in Peralta, the way feeling had run against Karns here.

Karns had gotten off lucky, most people thought. He had been given a life sentence instead of the rope, even though the bank's teller had been shot dead during the robbery. Karns had pleaded innocent all along, in the face of the fact that he had had nearly a thousand dollars in new money in his possession when Vail caught him in Mogollon country.

MAX BOGARD

JOHN VAIL

That sentence wasn't exactly a matter of judicial leniency, although there had been some doubt in the jury's mind. It was a cold business proposition, arranged to give the tough guards at Yuma plenty of time to persuade Ben Karns to reveal the hiding place of the rest of the nine thousand dollars that was gone from the Peralta bank.

This particular job was done now, and the taste that it left inside John Vail was no better than he had known before. If Mrs. Karns, by

some illogical woman reasoning, chose to blame him for her husband's difficulties, that was too bad. There was nothing Vail could do about it.

He saw her turn and go back inside the hotel. He leaned against a porch post, enjoying his cheroot, while Follis tramped back across the bridge. With a negligent shove of his shoulder Vail pushed himself away from the post when Follis came near, and followed him into the bank.

FOLLIS had the envelope. He crumpled it in his hand and threw it into a wastebasket. "You had it written out, all right. Damn it, you've accused me of—"

"I've accused you of nothing, friend. To you, I merely mentioned what some other bankers have done. In that message I only suggested that the examiners come down here and check on your affairs." Vail shrugged. "I can always write another telegram."

Follis was sweating. "You mercenary devil. It's ridiculous, five thousand dollars for a few days' work. I've heard of your sprees. You'll take the money and squander it."

"All five thousand of it," Vail said thinly. "I come high, but I earned it. I took my chances with Karns; he might have shot me, you know. Better make it in hard cash, friend. I don't want to ride two hundred miles and then find you've stopped payment on a piece of paper. I like the kind of money that jingles."

"I haven't that much specie on hand," the banker said angrily.

"Get it, then. How long will it take?" Vail asked.

"Several days. The money has to be sent from Bisbee." Follis wiped a hand along his jaw. He was a shaken man; like a lump of jelly, Vail thought.

"All right," Vail said. "I'll be around, friend."

Out in the clean sunlight again, Vail untied his horse. Two people were in the street in front of the hotel now—Mrs. Karns, carrying a tooled-leather reticule that Vail hadn't seen in her hand before, and a darkly compact man in cowhand's clothing, who sat astride a Box K horse. Box K, Vail recalled from the testimony at the trial, was Ben Karns's outfit.

The two of them were talking, but when Julia Karns saw Vail she broke off the conversation abruptly and walked toward him. The man pulled his horse around, roughly, and followed her.

John Vail waited, since it was plain that she wanted to talk to him. He removed his black hat as she neared him, in a gesture of politeness that struck him as somewhat silly after the warning he'd had about her. But then, Follis might have been merely bluffing.

"Mr. Vail," the woman said, "you came for your filthy money, didn't you? Did you get it?"

"No, ma'am. I don't do business except for cash, and Follis has to send away for it."

The relief that came into her face made it seem like she had been all keyed up to do something, had Vail been leaving at once, that would have taken all her determination. As things stood she could put it off a little while; she was relieved about that, and she relaxed somewhat.

The mounted man had ridden up behind Vail's horse and now reined it, saying, "Now Julia, don't do something that you'll regret. You ought to let me handle this."

She gave him a swift and angry look that stopped his talk. Vail, glancing up now at the man's deeply-marked, mustached face, remembered him from the trial. He was Max Bogard, the Box K foreman, who had reluctantly admitted on the witness stand that the outfit had been in financial difficulties before the robbery.

"I'm capable of judging what's best," the woman said, seeming resentful of the way Bogard had followed her. "You'd better be getting that stock salt you came for, Max, and then go back to the ranch."

Bogard grunted something and pulled away. He's a tough one, Vail thought. Bogard would be about forty, marked by hard living and yet handsome in a way that would appeal to women who liked a dangerous man.

Once her foreman had gone, Julia Karns said with icy calm, "You'll deny, of course, that you knew all along my husband wasn't guilty. You'll have to deny it in order to

protect yourself, since you framed him. But now that you'll be here a few days I want you to think about that, John Vail."

He didn't know what she was getting at, and certainly didn't know how to argue with a woman in a matter such as this. She wasn't the helpless, soft sort of woman at all; although, in her simple dress, her body had its full share of mature womanly charm. Vail wondered if Follis had been right about her carrying of a gun, and he decided, in view of Bogard's uneasy attitude, that she was.

It didn't seem that she was going to use it just now, however. Looking at her, Vail thought that here was a woman who had not only looks but that added something which people called character. There was depth to her, and a vitality he hadn't encountered in a woman before.

Certainly she wasn't trying to flirt with him, with her eyes hating him as they were. And yet something about her seemed to call to him in a way that was deeper and more powerful than attraction he had felt for other women.

He put the feeling aside and said, as gently as he could, "You're wrong about all that, Mrs. Karns. Your husband got himself into that trouble of his. All I did was my duty."

"Your duty!" Her tightly restrained mouth twisted. "You're not even an officer of any kind, just a hired thug who happens to get his pay from the Territory, and gouges whatever more he can from men like Sam Follis!"

She gave him no chance to answer that, but turned away and walked swiftly back to the hotel. He couldn't have answered it anyway.

JOHN VAIL stepped into his saddle and rode on out of the town. Ordinarily, with a roll of money remaining in his pocket and five thousand more coming his way, he would have taken a room at the hotel and then gone looking for some amusement. But he didn't want to do that, with Julia Karns staying there and likely to be goaded into some foolish action by his continued presence.

It wasn't that he was afraid of her, exactly; he just didn't know how to deal with her. So he rode across country in search of a camping spot and found one near a creek.

He was shaving, next morning, when a buggy drove into his camp. Hearing the sound of the approaching rig, Vail turned swiftly, dropping a hand to his holstered gun. Then he saw that its driver was Trem Wingate, editor of the Peralta *Cattleman*, one of the men to whom Vail had talked on his previous visit here when he was gathering information about Ben Karns. So he turned back to the little mirror that he had hung on the bole of a tree, and went on with his shaving.

Wingate wasn't much older than Vail, but he had come west for his health and looked it. His thin face had a melancholy look to it, but a wry and sardonic wisdom as well. "You keep yourself slicked up, even in camp," Wingate said. "Are you thinking of charming Mrs. Karns out of her notion of shooting you?"

"I don't know for sure that the lady has any such notion. As for charming her—" Vail gestured to his reflection in the mirror—"I'm a little too tough looking for her sort, friend."

"The toughness you think you see is mostly on the inside of you." Wingate settled himself in the buggy seat and with quick, nervous movements dug out a pipe, which he filled and lighted. "You must have put a kink in Sam Follis's tail, one way or another. He was telling me this morning that he's going to shell out that reward."

Vail ignored the unspoken yet pointed invitation to tell how he had accomplished that. He ran a comb through his unruly black hair.

"Sam tells me," Wingate went on, "that you've demanded cash money, and that it'll take him several days to get it. Why not look around this country while you're waiting? A man like you ought to think of settling down sometime, and Spanish Springs Valley, where I'm going today, is a mighty pretty place."

Vail looked at him. John Vail settling down—there was a joke for you. A wry sort of joke, though, because he had been thinking about the future lately, reaching ahead to the time when he no longer had the speed to handle the tough ones. A man was old at thirty, in this game.

"Going out there to gather news for your paper?" Vail asked thinly.

"No, I dabble in real estate on the side. You're coming into some money, and I can get a slice of it if I can show you something that interests you."

Vail shrugged and reached for his shirt. "If you want to waste your time, it's all right with me, friend."

Spanish Springs Valley was a big place. To reach it you left the main part of the Peralta range and climbed through rolling, grassy hill country that was studded with yucca. The valley itself, once you looked down into it from high above, was a pretty one, as Wingate had said. It was several miles wide, marked down the middle by a meandering line of cottonwood trees that were big, but looked tiny in the distance. They, along with the greenness of the valley, proved that there was water down there.

"It's twenty miles long," Wingate said as he swung the buggy down the grass-grown road into the valley. "Some Spanish folks owned it—descendants of the Peralta family. They used to live in style. But when we Americans took things over and started shoving, they couldn't match the pace." He shrugged. "They lost everything, got too far in debt trying to maintain their style of living." Giving Vail a sidelong glance, he asked abruptly, "Do you think Karns was guilty?"

The question caught Vail off-guard, as Wingate no doubt had intended. After a moment Vail said simply, "He ran."

"Innocent men have done that before—weak ones, who thought the odds were stacked too high against them, and went kind of crazy with fear."

"He had a lot of money with him. Where did it come from, if not from the bank?"

"That's the one thing his lawyer couldn't get around. Everybody knows Karns was broke after all those dry years, yet he had that money. Mrs. Karns thinks you planted it on him."

"Why would I do that?"

"Simple arithmetic. One thousand dollars gets you five, when you collect that reward. Besides, there's the matter of upholding your reputation. When John Vail goes after a man, he's as good as hung, or imprisoned. But let it go, for now. The rest of it, once the money matter was driven home, was just a good job of case building on the part of the prosecutor.

"A hard-up cattleman who was about to lose his ranch—and his attractive wife too, if he couldn't support her any more—took the easy way out and helped himself to enough money to last him a long while. The teller got in his way, so he had to kill the man. After that he figured he'd hide out somewhere until he could send for his wife. It was simple and clear-cut, all wrapped up and tied with the prosecutor's bright blue ribbon. But was it right?"

"It's not my job to decide things like that. All I did was find him and take him in for trial."

"Did he give you any trouble when you caught him?"

"No, he just sat there. He's not the kind that would fight."

"His story was that he didn't even know that money was in his saddlebag. He'd heard a shot in the bank and found the teller lying in there, dead. And he got scared that he'd be blamed for it. He'd fired a shot at a coyote on the way to town, and the empty cartridge was still in his gun. He'd had a run-in with the teller, who was a lusty buck and had been bothering Mrs. Karns. So Karns thought things would look bad for him, and he ran. That's simple and clear-cut too."

"And thin," Vail said shortly. "Damned thin."

WINGATE gave him a sour look. "You haven't a bit of use for weak people, eh? You can't savvy how fear can drive a man to doing something foolish. You're so damn secure behind that toughness of yours!"

Beginning to wonder whether Wingate had wanted to show him some country or to hash over something that was finished and done with, Vail said. "A man looks out for himself. He does a good job of it and gets by, or he bungles it and gets himself in trouble. It's the way the world is, friend."

"What I'm interested in is people, and that includes the weak ones. We're all weak when something hits us hard enough. But I wonder about you, Vail. You've made yourself into

kind of a machine, faster with a gun than anybody you've met so far. Working for the law like you do, you could be something of a hero, but you aren't. You never give a man a chance."

"I'd be a fool if I did. When I go after one it's my job to get him, not play games that might get me shot."

"So? From one end of the Territory to the other they've got names for you—gunman, killer who's smart enough to get the law's backing when he shoots men down, bounty hunter. Sometime I'd like to take you apart and find out what's inside you. If there's something human in you it's twisted all out of shape. What did that to you?"

"Think what you damn please," Vail said angrily. "So can everybody else. The law's job is to protect everybody, including those weak ones you mentioned, so long as they're square."

"So it says," Wingate retorted, "in the books." The buggy had been rolling along the well-grassed floor of the valley for some time now, during the talk. Shaking up the lines, Wingate added, "Ranch headquarters is just around the next bend up there."

The place didn't look like much at first glance. There was a low, rambling, tile-roofed house atop a small hill, with a cluster of smaller structures below it, in which the vaqueros had lived. The corrals seemed to be in fair shape. There was even a windmill.

Wingate drove up to the house and fumbled through his pockets for a key. The place was built in Spanish style; the thick walls were made of adobe, and its narrow barred windows eyed the outside world with a slitted look. It was much like a fort, and probably had served as one when the raiding Apaches came through here.

Once inside the empty rooms, John Vail looked around, struck by an odd feeling that he had been here before. He had never been near the place, of course. It must be that he had yearned for something like this, for something solid, without ever letting the pent-up desire shape itself into anything definite.

You could put a few rugs on this tiled floor, a piano in the corner opposite the fireplace. You'd need some lamps and furniture, of course. The dark beauty of Julia Karns would fit in here. Vail started, appalled by the course of his thinking.

Wingate led him on through the house, room after room of it. "There's a caretaker who comes up here and waters things once a week," Wingate was saying. "With a little fixing up this would be a place where a man could live in style. There's plenty of range in the valley for cattle, and good wells."

"What kind of a deal can I make?" Vail asked, interrupting him.

"You decide things in a hurry, bucko. The price is ten thousand. Three thousand down, say, would leave you a couple of thousand to buy stocker cattle with."

It was a crazy thing, this buying of a ranch, Vail thought as he followed Wingate down the hill for a look at the corrals. But perhaps it wasn't so impulsive a thing at that. His piled-up dissatisfaction with his way of life had come suddenly to a point, sharp and intolerable, up there in the house that now was going to be his.

Someone was clanging a hammer on iron under the shady ramada that served as a ranch blacksmith shop. The clanging continued as Wingate and Vail approached; the man who was pounding out a red-hot horseshoe didn't look up from his work.

"Lew," Wingate called out.

"Yeah?"

"This gentleman is buying Spanish Ranch. Better come out and meet him. Lew Skellar, John Vail."

Skellar was past fifty, with a seamy, hatchet-like face that came close to being ugly. But he had a capable look about him.

"Vail, eh?" Skellar put aside his hammer and wiped his palms down the leather apron he'd put on for this job. He shoved his hat far back on his graying head and looked at Vail without offering to shake hands. "I saw you fellers drive up to the house."

"Lew's been taking care of things out here," Wingate said to Vail. "He knows where the wells are, and what condition the range is in."

"It isn't over-grazed, for a fact," Skellar said dryly. "There's a lot of rain up here that they don't get down below." He wasn't showing any concern about what might happen

to his job. The next move was up to the new owner.

He's an independent old cuss, Vail thought. Well, John Vail had never asked any man for anything, but he was going to have to start living differently now.

He said, "I'd be obliged if you'd stay on, Lew. I'll have to learn the ropes, and get the place stocked in a small way. If you're agreeable, we'll start for Tucson as soon as I've closed the deal. We'll buy cattle and drive them back."

Skellar began taking off his apron. "I can stick around till you're settled and can find somebody else to work for you."

That put it right on the line. Skellar didn't much like the idea of working for John Vail. Other men who knew Vail's reputation would probably feel the same way. Vail began to see that he would have to face a lot of antagonism in this rash jump from one kind of life to another.

IT WAS no surprise for him to learn, when they reached Peralta, that Spanish Ranch was owned by the bank. "So you get your money back, after all," he told Sam Follis, when the time came to sign the papers that Wingate had drawn up.

The banker made his fatuous smile. "You're getting a fine ranch, one that owns its own range. It's all that's left of a Spanish grant that covered this whole country at one time. And you're buying in at a bargain price, at the bottom of the cattle market. Beef prices can't go any way but up."

"I'll have to buy some stock," Vail said. "You can forget about that specie, friend. What I need now is something that they'll honor in Tucson for the extra two thousand."

"I'll give you a draft on a Tucson bank," Follis said quickly.

The man wasn't hard to read. Bankers looked far ahead and figured what would happen in the future. This one must be thinking smugly that the gunman would fail as a rancher and that the bank would get its property back, along with any improvements Vail made in the meantime. In that way Follis's five-thousand-dollar reward outlay would be shaved, in the long run, to a small figure.

Wingate, smiling sardonically, said, "Since you're going to settle here, the first thing you'd better do is make your peace with Julia Karns."

"I've no quarrel with the lady," Vail said shortly.

He didn't even see the woman when he and Lew Skellar went on down the street to the Mercantile. They bought enough grub to last them through the long ride to Tucson, and got the storekeeper to stuff it into two floursacks. Skellar remembered that he needed some tobacco; while the cowhand was buying it Vail took the sacks out to the horses. After shouldering past a couple of men who were idling on the porch, he started tying the sacks onto Skellar's horse and onto his own, putting them atop the bedrolls.

He wasn't wary enough. He was thinking of Spanish Ranch, which he had bought without really looking it over. He had always been coldly logical about things before this. Maybe he had jumped into this ranch deal on account of wanting to be near Julia Karns.

He sensed that the two cowboys on the porch were glancing at one another, and that one had dropped the stub of his cigarette and was grinding it under the heel of his boot.

"He shoved us pretty hard," said the man, who seemed to be about nineteen, and had a pinched-looking face and unbarbered, wheat-colored hair. "We ought to learn him a lesson, Blackie."

They came at Vail in a hurried rush, ducking down under the rail and crowding in between the horses. They were a couple of young hardcases, Vail thought, spoiled by their own fancied toughness but not particularly dangerous.

"Take it easy, boys," he said, facing around to them. "When you're in a man's way, let him through."

He felt a tug at his holster then. Whirling, he saw that Max Bogard had come up close behind him. The Box K foreman must have been lurking somewhere out behind the horses. Now he had Vail's gun, and he tossed it back over his shoulder into the street.

"The great John Vail," Bogard said. "Well, you don't have your fast gun any more." He nodded toward the pair behind Vail.

They seized Vail's arms. He fought against their grip, while the startled horses pitched and swung away from the struggling men. Then Bogard moved on in with a hard, confident tread and struck Vail in the face.

Vail tried to writhe away, but the two who held him from behind prevented that. Bogard was pounding him systematically, with blows calculated to hurt and to do lasting damage. A knotted fist grazed Vail's cheek with a force that would have torn the flesh away if Vail had not managed to jerk his head to one side.

He heard shouts, up and down the street, and a sound of running boots. People were coming to see this. John Vail was caught, trapped. Muscles writhing in agony under Bogard's blows, he tried again to free himself from those who clung to his back.

He nearly made it. But Bogard seized him too, forcing him against the hitchrail. "You'll crawl when you leave here, bounty hunter," Bogard panted. "And you'd better not come back! Get his arm out there, Blackie."

They were stretching Vail's right arm across the rail. Bogard went under the rail and bobbed up on the other side of it, his mustached face grinning as he grabbed Vail's wrist with both hands.

Vail knew what they aimed to do. They were going to break his arm. That would heal; but splintered bones could damage muscles in such a way that the arm would never be any good for gunfighting again.

A voice broke into it then, saying coldly, "Leave off that, boys."

Lew Skellar was standing on the porch of the store, his gun cocked and uptilted in his hand, a look of judicial, impersonal deadliness on his hatchet face.

Bogard jerked a startled look around. "Lew, what's this to you?"

Before Skellar could answer that, a woman thrust herself through the crowd. "Max!" she cried, angrily. "Blackie, Dude, get away from him!"

They obeyed her. Weakened by the beating he'd had, Vail clung to the rail to keep from falling, blood pounding in his ears, and forced his eyes to focus on her. The woman was Julia Karns. She was giving Bogard a verbal lacing now. Sickened by reaction, Vail heard it only dimly, but was aware that she was reminding Bogard that she had told him to keep out of this.

"Get back out to the ranch," she ordered. "Take Dude and Blackie with you. And stay there!"

Bogard's wickedly handsome face wasn't contrite at all. If ever Vail had seen a man look at a woman as if he wanted her, Bogard was that man. Vail didn't think that this attack was rooted in any loyalty of Bogard's to Ben Karns. It might have been done to get the jump on matters and keep Julia from making a fool of herself, as Bogard had hinted yesterday.

But, looking at the man now, Vail thought it more likely that Bogard had wanted to make a grandstand play for the woman's eyes. She hated Vail; by humbling the manhunter, and breaking his gun arm, thus ending his career, Bogard might have hoped to lift himself in her favor. It hadn't come off that way. And now Bogard stepped back, mumbling something under his breath, still eyeing the woman.

JULIA KARNS came over to the hitchrail. The wind had come up, pressing her simple dress against her lithe body. "Mr. Vail, I don't want anyone else dabbling in this. Trem Wingate was telling me, just now, that you've bought Spanish Ranch. That's fine. You'll have to stay here to look after it, and you'll have time to think about things. I want you to do a lot of thinking, Vail, because I'm going to kill you."

Vail just looked at her, distantly aware of the startled look that her mention of the Spanish Ranch deal brought to Bogard's face. Vail had heard grief-stricken women make threats in screaming hysteria; but there was none of that in Julia Karns. She was calm about it, gravely serious. She had the air of a person who had thought things out and had come to a decision, and intended to go through with it regardless of consequences.

Looking at her, Vail tried to sort out his feelings about her. He had known a lot of women who'd been pretty in a contrived sort of way. This one was different. She had depth to her, a beauty that went deep, and a

vital aliveness that would reward the man of her choice. She was being very foolish at the moment, but that was understandable. Even so, she wasn't going at it as other women would, but was being practical and determined about her vengeance.

He picked up his hat and knocked dust from it, but didn't say anything.

"Well?" she demanded. "Perhaps you're not taking me seriously, Vail. You'd better!"

Vail knew what ailed him, now. For the first time in his life he had really fallen for a woman. And he had picked one who hated him. With some wise corner of his mind clamoring that he was a fool, he couldn't think of anything to say to her.

She gave him one more look, scornful of his continued silence, and turned away from him. The crowd began to scatter. Vail went out into the street and picked up his gun. When he returned to the horses he found Lew Skellar stepping into saddle with an air of detachment and calmness.

Vail paused as he put his boot into the stirrup, and looked across at the cowhand. "Thanks, Lew. But you don't like me much. Why did you take my part?"

Skellar spat in the disdainful, eloquent way an Indian would. "If they'd gone at it right I'd have sat back and watched, the same as anybody else. But they were too dirty."

For the second time, Vail thought, Skellar had put him in his place.

They camped high in the mountains that night. Vail's face was puffed and scraped in spots, and his jaws hurt so that he could hardly chew. Finally he gave up trying to eat, and, taking the cylinder out of his gun, began to clean the weapon carefully.

"You look like hell," Lew said, his homely face seeming to gloat across the campfire.

Vail didn't say anything. After a time Lew chuckled and poked up the fire. "You're not a man that runs off at the mouth, for a fact. You didn't have a word to say, I noticed, when Julia Karns told you what she aims to do."

"What could a man say to her? She had no business making threats like that in public."

"She doesn't care what happens to her on account of it. Her life is busted up, and she thinks you did it by framing Ben."

"I don't stoop that low, friend."

"Is that a fact? That reward Sam Follis put up was a mighty big one, worth going to some trouble to collect."

Lew wasn't believing Vail's denial. Wingate hadn't believed it. Nobody would; when a man became a bounty hunter he stepped across the line.

The cattlemen around Tucson didn't like the idea of dealing with John Vail. He was a manhunter, and not of their kind. They let their distaste for him show; but with the beef market down and their cattle gaunted by a series of dry years, they needed his money. Vail and Skellar located a hard-up Tanque Verde rancher who finally agreed to let them cut two hundred head of stocker cattle out of his herd, at a hard-up price, seven dollars a head.

Lew Skellar was shrewd when it came to buying cattle. Vail learned a lot during one hot, dusty afternoon while the two of them perched on a chute and inspected the cows that were driven through. Take this one. Let that one go by; the rangy, wild-looking ones are bred for desert graze and won't do well on rich grass. No, not that one either; she's a cactus-eater and she'll die inside of four months. Next one's all right. Skip that one; she'll drop her calf too soon.

With several hundred dollars of his two thousand left, Vail bought two bulls, and then looked around for saddle horses. He chose six young and blocky animals at a horse trader's lot in Tucson. And then, except for the money he'd had in his pocket when he rode into Peraltar a few days before, he was broke again.

He wasn't worried about that. The cattle were gaunt, but they would fatten up on the rich grass of Spanish Valley. He owned them outright, and could mortgage the herd if necessary.

Then he ran into trouble. Dealing with money-hungry cattlemen was one thing, but hiring cowhands was another. Every cowhand was his own man; he might be broke, but still he was particular about picking an employer. He could live on next to nothing, free-lunching in saloons and sleeping in stables but he wouldn't work for John Vail.

Bullets sang past Vail as he ran, dodging to make a poor target

One after another, they told Vail that in so many words, while Lew Skellar took it all in with a smug look on his face. Vail had to settle for a couple of down-and-outers, Dake Goss and Morey Scott, men who had drunk up all their money and knew they couldn't hold down jobs anywhere. They were a mangy-looking pair, unkempt and downright hungry, and yet they drove a hard bargain. Vail had to feed them up for several days so they'd be in condition to ride. Moreover, he had to advance them half a month's pay so they could buy whisky to take along.

They weren't of much use on the trail, which

led through desert country at first. They shirked whenever they could, and complained about everything. Lew Skellar swore at them, but that did no good.

The trip was pure hell for John Vail. In past times he had crossed this sort of country swiftly and in the coolness of night, on a fast and easy-riding horse. He still had the horse; but now Skellar and himself each did the work of two men, doubling back and forth in the dust and the heat to keep the cattle moving.

At last, though, the herd zigzagged up through the rolling hills and spilled out onto the rich graze of Spanish Valley. And so, two weeks after his first sight of the place, John Vail was home.

HE PUT in a few days at the ranch, getting things in order. One of the wells had caved and had to be cleaned out; Skellar, acting as foreman, at Vail's request, put Goss and Scott to doing the wet and disagreeable job. The men all bunked in one of the adobe buildings by the corrals, taking turns with the cooking.

On the evening of the fourth day Vail went up to his fine house on the hill. But it seemed an empty place. He began to see that he had been a fool for jumping into all this so hastily. It took more than what he had to build a new life for himself.

Next day he saddled the black and rode down to Peralta. Lonnie Newton came running down the street to greet him. Vail drummed up something for the kid to do by having him take the black horse down to the creek and water him.

When Vail had finished buying a stock of grub in the store the merchant, who had a postoffice cubicle in one corner of the place, brought out a letter for him. Vail only glanced at it. Noticing the bank's name on the large brown-paper envelope, he stuffed it inside his shirt. When he went outside he gave the Newton kid a dollar for watering the horse.

It was too much, Vail thought, as the kid darted into the store, no doubt to get candy. But Vail was feeling good. He liked the quiet of this place, liked the little business of ranch life, such as coming here for mail and groceries. Tying the sacks of grub behind his saddle, he looked down the street to the saloon, which was at the far end of the town, and debated buying himself a drink. He decided against that; one drink would make him want another, and maybe he'd want a girl too, and he wasn't in any position to finance a spree.

Trem Wingate had come out of the newspaper office, though, and was standing on its porch; he'd be somebody to talk to. Leading his horse, Vail went over there.

Wingate said, "Better subscribe for the paper, Vail. It'll have your name in it this week. I hear you've driven cattle into Spanish Valley."

Vail nodded, saying, "All right, Trem, put me down for a year's subscription."

"Think you'll last that long, bucko?" Wingate smiled slyly. "Seen anything of Julia Karns up there?"

"No."

"You will. She's gone out to her ranch, which isn't too far from yours. She can't hold out very long, broke as she is and with her range dried up, but she's taking her time with you. She wants you to savor that bullet before she puts it into you."

"Damn it, Trem, quit harping on that! It's just a notion she has, and she'll get over it."

"You're not fool enough to misjudge the lady that far, bucko. She's a determined woman, one who's been hurt. You'd better hurry up and prove to her that you didn't frame her husband. If you can."

Vail thought about that while he rode out of Peralta. But his thinking dwelt more on Julia Karns as a woman than on the threat she had made. That kind of thinking put a pull on him; so, after stopping a cowboy to ask directions to Box K, he swung over there.

The Karns headquarters had a down-at-the-heels look. It was among low, dry, dead-looking hills, on which he saw no cattle at all. The buildings were small and poorly kept up, although some pathetic-looking flowers still blossomed in the yard of the house.

Several men were lounging in the shade of the bunkhouse. Vail saw Max Bogard, the pair of would-be hardcases who had jumped him in Peralta, and three more of the same sort.

Bogard came out as Vail quartered toward the house. Bogard hurried, to block Vail's way.

"What do you want here?" the foreman demanded harshly.

"To see Mrs. Karns."

"What about?"

"That's between the lady and myself, friend." Vail spurred roughly ahead, so that Bogard had to dodge to one side to avoid being run down.

Julia Karns had come out onto her porch by the time Vail stepped from his saddle. She was wearing a dress made of some thin stuff that clung to the lithe roundness of her body, and yet would give some coolness against the heat of the day.

She said, "Well?"

"I'd like to talk to you, Mrs. Karns." Vail glanced back toward Bogard, who stood, spread-legged and alert, within earshot. "In private, if I may."

She shrugged and led him into the tiny parlor, then turned to face him. She didn't invite him to sit down. "Well?" she said again.

"I've moved some cattle into Spanish Valley," he told her. "Not many of them; there's room for a lot more. I notice that your range is dried up, so if you want to put your stock on my graze you're welcome to do so." He lifted a hand to stop her, as she drew a swift breath. "Don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to buy off your opinion of me. I just want to be neighborly."

Her soft, rich-looking mouth twisted in scorn. "You needn't go to the trouble of lying about what you're trying to do, Vail. It happens there isn't any stock left. I sold all our cattle to hire lawyers to defend Ben."

Vail was puzzled by this. "You've kept your crew."

"That was Max's doing," she said bitterly. "He doesn't want to break up his crew. Max has rich friends back East, and he has written them for money so he can buy new stock."

It seemed pretty thin to Vail, that a hard-case like Bogard would have friends in the strait-laced East. Judging from the looks of that crew, Bogard might be holding them together with something else in mind—something like cattle-thievery, say. Vail wished now that he knew more about Julia's foreman. If he were in the Territorial capital now, he could find out in a hurry. Lawmen worked together on matters like that, and had their files of information on the background of everyone who had ever gotten into trouble.

SOMETHING else occurred to Vail then, and he said roughly, "So that we could buy stock, you said. You and Bogard, is that it?"

Her dark eyes flashed with anger as she caught his meaning. "He had that in mind, all right," she admitted. "He's like any other man. A woman whose husband is away is fair game, isn't she? He leaves me alone now." She gestured toward a Winchester which stood in one corner of the room, near the door. "But I've got to get some stock. I don't know why I'm discussing this with you, Vail, except that since I'm going to kill you I've a certain freedom to speak plainly with you."

"Forget that crazy notion," he said. "You shouldn't go around making threats like that. There are laws against it."

"I haven't much use for the law any more, Mr. Vail. Take a look around you. See that saddle over there by the window? It's not finished and never will be, but you can see the skilled work that went into it."

"A beautiful job, all right," he said, wondering what she was getting at.

"Ben was making it for me. He always liked to do things with his hands. He couldn't buy fine things for me, so he would make them. But he's gone now, taken from me by you, so you could collect your filthy money?"

"Shooting somebody won't get him back," Vail said thickly.

"No. But it will settle an account, Mr. Vail."

He shook his head, baffled and not knowing how to convince her that he hadn't framed Ben Karns. "You're only fooling yourself, Julia. You can't kill anybody; it's not in you. A wise old man once told me that the things people do have to come from inside them."

"I didn't know that you ever had a friend, Vail!"

"He wasn't any particular friend." Vail smiled ruefully. "As a matter of fact he was a nosy old fool, giving me the devil about my way of life."

She gave a throaty, bitter laugh. "So you're a little human after all! I'm glad, Vail. Now you can sit up there at Spanish Ranch and think about what it's going to be like to die."

She had goaded him too much. On a sudden crazy impulse he took out his gun and, holding the weapon by the barrel, held it out to her. "Go ahead, take it," he said. "You might as well find out right now that you couldn't kill anyone."

She ignored the gun. "Because I'm a woman? You should know better than that, Vail. Women are pretty good killers, though I've never heard of one of them doing it for money, as some men do. A woman has to have a real reason. I have one. I can do it all right, when the time comes. But not yet, Vail. You're going to wait, and suffer a little." She said it flatly; she had her mind made up, all wrong though she was.

Holstering the gun, Vail said, "You could always appeal your husband's case to a higher court, you know."

"Yes. But with what? The lawyers tell me that it would take several thousand dollars, and they hint that with a few thousand more we could be pretty sure to swing the case the way we want. I could never get that much. I used to have a lot of respect for the law, but my eyes are opened now. I've found that justice is something for those who can buy it. So I decided to kill you myself, because what you did was just as criminal as murder."

There was no point in further talk, Vail thought. Women could be all velvet, or all claws. Julia Karns was showing him her claws, and he couldn't blame her too much, after what she had been through. He turned to leave.

"Wait," she said suddenly. "I'm curious about you, Vail. What do you get out of hunting down men? Besides the money, I mean."

He shrugged. "It's just a job with me. Or it was. It kept me on the move, so I could see new places, meet new people. I liked that."

"And what was the matter with the old ones?"

She had him there. He shrugged again, not saying anything.

Her dark eyes scanned his face. "Tell me one more thing, Vail. Why did you buy Spanish Ranch?"

"Because of you."

He was certain that she read in the simple statement the meaning that was there; color came to her face, along with a guarded, defensive look.

But then she said bitterly, "Of course. You want to be somewhere close so you can watch me. You think the rest of the bank's money must be hidden here, and that I'll have to be getting it out pretty soon. You want to recover it for Sam Follis. Is he paying you a handsome reward for that too?"

Once again Vail could find no words to reason with her. He went on out. As he stepped off the porch he heard her crying, back in the house. She had been more keyed-up than she had permitted him to see, and now the letdown had come.

Bogard gave Vail a black look when he rode out of the yard. The foreman might have heard of Vail's success with women; and Julia hadn't run the manhunter out. One like Bogard would conclude that Vail had come here to get around her, to lay the groundwork for making love to her and thus save his own hide.

Vail wasn't pleased with himself, during the ride home. He had no business being in love with Julia Karns, but he couldn't do anything about that. Maybe he was as predatory as people thought he was, after all. Long associations with people who took what they wanted could have infected him with their viewpoint. Or it could be that the terrified kid who had once run from the Apaches and then had turned to fight them had had something stamped into him so deeply it would never rub out.

That thing was toughness. It was a quality which could take several forms. It could enable a man to walk into a gunfight, coldly aloof to danger. It could also enable him to

want something that belonged to someone else.

Many women were impressed by a man who stood alone and lived by being tough, a man who took what he wanted. Julia wasn't that sore of woman. She hadn't looked upon John Vail with anything but hate. Yet he wanted her. He wanted her for his wife, which was both crazy and lowdown, for she was the wife of another man.

John Vail took a long look at himself that afternoon, and didn't much like what he saw.

HE WAS almost home when his mind, dwelling on the things Julia had said to him, lighted upon the one thing that had a deeper meaning than he had thought at the time she said it. She had accused him of buying Spanish Ranch because he wanted to watch her and recover the bank's money when she got it out of its hiding place.

She had been on the defensive when she said that, and she must have blurted it out without thinking. But it meant that she knew he hadn't framed Ben Karns. If he had, he wouldn't look for the money on the Box K.

Vail's heart leaped but for a moment only. Julia had slipped there. But it didn't mean anything, except that she had accused Vail out of loyalty to her husband. She was loyal to Ben, even though, deep down, she knew he was guilty as hell.

Vail was abrupt and ill-humored that night. As soon as supper was over he sat down on his bunk and tore open the fat letter from the bank.

It contained the papers for the ranch deal, a deed and a copy of the mortgage. Sam Follis was systematic; not knowing when Vail would return to Peralta, the banker had put the papers in the mail, so that the bank would be clear of the transaction.

Vail was about to put the papers away when something about the envelope caught his attention. It was exactly like one he had seen before, the one he had found in Ben Karns's saddlebag with nine hundred and sixty dollars in it. The paper was the same, heavy brown stuff with tiny black fibers scattered through it.

The money taken from the bank had been mostly specie, Follis had reported, twenty-dollar gold pieces and so on. The contents of the envelope had been in greenbacks.

Vail sat back on his bunk, visualizing a man who had gotten into a bank and had shot the teller who had been working there. The man would work fast, scooping up money wherever he found it, knowing that the shot he'd fired had been heard all over town.

Maybe he would have brought a sack along with him, and he would stuff all the money into it, specie and greenbacks together. But would he take the time to find one of the bank's envelopes, sort the greenbacks out, and file them into it? No.

John Vail had never thought of it in that way. But he thought of it now. It was one of the two things that disturbed him during the next few days. The other one was the rustling.

The news of that hit him two days after his visit to Box K. Skellar, having had a run-in with Dake Goss after he'd caught the man sleeping instead of working, had gone out today to see that Goss was distributing blocks of salt as he'd been told to do. Along about noon Skellar came back to headquarters on his lathered horse, and pulled up in front of the ramada shop in which Vail was attempting to fashion a branding iron.

"You might as well leave off that," Skellar said, while his horse blew noisily. "By the time you get the hang of welding that iron you probably won't have any cattle left to use it on."

Vail stopped cranking the forge. "What are you getting at, Lew?"

"We're missing about fifty head, and one of the bulls, from the north end of the valley They didn't drift; they were gathered and driven up into the mountains, sometime early last night. I followed the sign till I saw it was pretty cold, then turned back and told Goss and Scott to bunch the rest of the cattle and watch 'em."

Vail didn't say anything more. He went over to the corral, where he threw his saddle on the black and mounted up. Twenty minutes later he was riding through the valley with Lew Skellar.

The sign was as Skellar had described it, fairly cold. The cattle had been driven off

by six mounted men, and they had gone up into the mountains rather than over the lower hills that blocked off this valley from the Peralta range on the west. Once it got well into the mountains, the trail bent around toward the south, toward Mexico.

"They pushed 'em hard," Skellar said, "not giving a damn how much tallow they ran off 'em. We're not catching up very fast. Do you want to follow 'em clear into Sonora, and leave what's left of your herd in care of those two no-goods at the ranch?"

"The bunch ahead of us won't be getting back to the valley tonight."

"That's a fact. Might be more of 'em around, though. It could be that those boys grabbed a little jag of cattle that they could move along fast, so you'd take after 'em and leave the valley clear for the rest of the outfit to clean it out."

"You'd better go back, Lew. Watch the herd all night. I'll keep on with this for awhile."

Skellar shrugged and reined away. "Good way to get yourself shot," he said in a tone which made it clear that he wouldn't much care, one way or the other, if that happened.

Vail kept on until past dark. Then, deep in the mountainous border country, he had to give it up. He had lost the trail again and again, and had had to double back and strike matches in order to find it. The moon would be up now, but its light didn't reach down into these twisted canyons.

He thought of finding some place to sleep, and going on again in the morning, but decided against that. By morning the cattle would be far ahead of him, well down into Sonora, where the men who had taken them might have friends to help them out.

He didn't think that this rustling was the work of Mexicans who had jumped across the border. They couldn't have learned, so quickly, that Spanish Ranch was stocked again. No, it had been done by someone close by—someone like Max Bogard.

The Box K foreman wouldn't have much money, now that Julia couldn't pay her crew any more. And fifty head of cattle would bring at least two hundred and fifty dollars down in Mexico on a quick sale, with no questions asked. It was not much of a fortune, to be sure, but it was a lever Bogard could use against Julia, who would have to take any help she could get, or lose her ranch.

Unless . . . Vail swore softly in the dark. Unless this had been Julia's way of hitting back at him. She had said that she was going to make him suffer. He turned back.

IT WAS nearly morning when he reached the Box K and stalked, without ceremony, into the little bunkhouse. The place smelled of stale tobacco smoke and sweat but it was empty, as he had thought it would be. He went out into the moonlight again and was thrusting his boot-toe into the stirrup, when he heard a sound up at the house.

Julia was on the porch, tightening a wrapper about her with one hand and holding her Winchester with the other. "You out there," she called. "What do you want?"

Vail swung into his saddle and rode toward the house.

"Vail!" she exclaimed, as he neared the porch. "What are you doing here at this hour?"

"Looking for your foreman. You weren't expecting to hear anyone ride in, eh?"

"Yes, I was. The boys went down to Peralta tonight, and I haven't heard them come back. When I heard just the one horse I thought there'd been trouble in town." She lifted a hand, pushing her darkly glossy, disordered hair back from her face as she looked up at Vail. "What did you want with Max?"

"Just to see if he were here."

"Well, you've seen that he isn't. Maybe he won't be back at all; I don't know. We had a row after you were here the other day, and he was abusive. I told him— No, I don't think he'll be back."

Vail made a shot in the dark. "He's kept your crew together, but somebody's had to keep paying them, or they wouldn't stay."

"He gave them a little money, I think," she admitted. "He bragged about doing fairly well at poker down in Peralta."

But not well enough, Vail thought. Bogard was the type who would want to get money and power in a hurry. Particularly now, when money would give him power over Julia.

Bogard would be back, he thought.

"John." Julia was lifting her face again, to look at him directly.

"Yes?"

This was the first time she had called him by his given name. Looking down at her, he felt a stir of heady warmth as he permitted his gaze to rove over the strongly feminine loveliness of her. He had to make an effort to keep himself in check.

"You were right," she went on tightly. "About me, I mean. I was upset by what's happened, and not thinking as I should. I guess I'm just not cold-blooded enough to kill. Max jolted me into realizing that when we had that row, and he kept saying he would kill you for me. I hate you for what you are, John Vail, but it came to me that killing you wouldn't solve anything."

She didn't know about the rustling, Vail thought; no use troubling her with it. Her dark eyes were saying that she was a lonely woman, one who was warmly eager for life, even while her lips said she hated him. Maybe people were right when they said that hate and love were dangerously hard to tell apart sometimes. Vail sensed that if he got down from the saddle and took her in his arms, she would respond.

He didn't do that. Maybe this was the only decent thing he had done in his life, but he touched a hand to the brim of his hat and said good night to her in sober quiet, and got out of there.

The next day he slept until nearly noon. While he was fixing himself some breakfast, Lew Skellar came in. Yawning, Skellar said that the remaining cattle were bunched around Middle Well, and that they were all right.

"Better get some sleep, Lew," Vail said. "We won't be having any trouble during daylight hours, I think."

"Maybe not. You never did catch up with those fast riders, I take it."

"No. I got into rough country down there, and kept losing the trail in the dark."

Skellar gave him a thoughtful look. "A man'd have to be either awfully foolish or very hard up, to steal cows from John Vail." His tone was faintly jeering. "Looks like they got away with it, though."

"We're not finished with them yet, Lew."

"That a fact?" Skellar sat down on his bunk and began pulling off his boots. "I wouldn't depend on Scott and Goss too much, if I were you. They're jabbering together every chance they get; my guess is they're scared there'll be more trouble. If it comes, they'll run out on you."

"How about you, Lew? Can I depend on you?"

Skellar's homely face was empty of expression. "I never judge a man by what people say about him, nor by what he says about himself. I haven't had time to decide about you yet."

Vail saddled a fresh horse and rode to Peralta, reaching the town in mid-afternoon. He went to the telegrapher's first, where he wrote out a message to an official he knew in the Territorial capital. It was the sort of message that would ordinarily have gone by sealed letter, but this time he was in a hurry.

The telegrapher looked up quickly when he read the content of the message. "I'd forget about what that says, friend," Vail advised. "Just send it off."

"You bet, Mr. Vail. Not a word to anybody. That's part of my job."

The telegrapher would talk, in spite of his saying that he wouldn't. His eyes had an avid look that said he was eager to tell people that Vail had sent off Max Bogard's name and description, along with a request for the man's record if he had one. Something like this always set tongues to wagging. But that couldn't be helped now.

Vail rode back along the path to the bridge, crossed it, and went down the street to the Mercantile, where he bought two Winchesters, saddle scabbards for the rifles, and several boxes of ammunition. The storeman showed his curiosity in every way he could without coming right out and asking why Vail was buying rifles. But the aloof coldness in Vail's face forbad questions.

AFTER taking the rifles out to his horse and tying them to the saddle, Vail went over to the bank. Sam Follis had hired a new teller, a plump-cheeked young man who peered curiously through his wicket as Vail

tramped past him and pushed through the little gate in the counter.

Follis, sitting behind a desk near the bank's back door, greeted Vail with forced geniality. "Well, well, Vail! How are you making out with Spanish Ranch?"

"Pretty good," Vail said guardedly. "I've been doing some thinking about that robbery you had here. Would any of that money—the part of it that was in greenbacks, say—have been kept in one of those envelopes you use?"

"No. Sansom was counting it out when he was killed. It was a hot night, and the fool had left the doors open. He'd taken everything out of the safe to balance the books."

"How did it happen you had so much cash on hand?"

"It was the end of the month. And one of the big ranchers had sold a lot of stock to a buyer who'd paid cash." Follis's pale eyes narrowed. "What are you getting at, Vail?"

"Nothing in particular. The testimony at the trial showed that there was a big poker game down at the saloon on the night of the robbery, and Ben Karns lost what money he had about an hour before the killing, and left the game."

"That's right. He took it pretty hard."

"Did anybody else leave that game?"

"We all left it, when we heard that shot."

"No, not then. Before the shot."

"Nobody left the game except Karns." Follis was getting red in the face now. "Are you getting some crazy notion that Karns didn't do it after all? Playing detective is a little out of your line, Vail. One of the sacks that we keep the specie in was missing, so Karns must have taken it to carry the money."

"That money I found on him wasn't in a sack. It was in one of your envelopes."

Follis made a gesture of irritation. "It must have been lying on the counter, and he scooped it up along with the currency. He hid the sack of specie somewhere. It would be heavy, and wouldn't be harmed by exposure to the weather, as currency would. So he put the bills in the envelope and kept them with him."

"You've got it all figured out, eh?"

"I didn't figure it out, Vail. The Pinkerton man I hired did." Follis tugged at his coat lapels, trying to look pompous. "The one thing you want to remember is that Karns ran."

"Yeah," Vail said sourly, "he ran." Nodding curtly to the banker, he turned and tramped out.

Follis, he was thinking, was a fourflusher, a man who might be crooked in a mild and secretive way, but too flabby-gutted to be a killer. Everything still pointed straight to Ben Karns.

Vail stalled around the town, then went into the Chinaman's restaurant and ate a tasteless meal. He was finishing his pie when the telegrapher came into the restaurant with an air of bustling but secretive importance, and handed him a paper.

It was his answer from the Territorial capital. Max Bogard, under a variety of names, had a record that was impressive, in a shoddy way: sale of his employer's cattle, Crockett County, Texas—escaped from custody. Stage holdup, Colorado—nine months, Colorado State Pen. Cattle thievery, New Mexico—not apprehended. Confidence swindle, El Paso—escaped to Mexico.

Officialdom hadn't known that the man was here, now using the name of Max Bogard. The lawman up in Phoenix had added one more thing, no doubt smiling wryly as he did so: *No rewards outstandings.*

Vail paid off the Chinaman and went out to his horse. Criminals, he had learned long ago, tended to move along lines of habit. Bogard was what was known as a border-jumper. When he got in trouble he fled across a state or a national line, well aware that extradition was a long and costly process and one not often considered worthwhile in the case of a small-time crook.

THINGS went along placidly at Spanish Ranch during the following week. Vail sent Skellar over to the Box K a couple of times, not wanting to go himself. Each time, Lew returned with word that Bogard had not shown up as yet. The second time he went over there Lew took along a sack of groceries, which Julia refused to accept.

Trem Wingate drove out one day, and said slyly, "You've bought rifles, I hear. Been having any trouble, bucko?"

"None that we can't handle," Vail told him shortly.

Wingate laughed. "It's kind of funny, but nobody in this world can do a single thing without people finding out all about it. They counted the cattle you drove in from Tucson. A Diamond Cross rider went deer hunting up in the mountains this week, and happened onto a trail where some cattle had been driven over into Mexico.

"On his way home he swung past here and counted the cattle you had left. You've been rustled, bucko. John Vail's been clipped for some stock like any ordinary rancher. And Bogard is gone from the Box K, along with his bully crew. Two plus two, my friend. They're saying that Julia Karns has started getting even with you."

"Forget about that," Vail said angrily. "Trem, I want you to do something for her. Pass the hat if you have to. It's a sure thing that Follis won't make her a loan so she can buy new stock, after having his teller shot by her husband. But her neighbors ought to do something."

"Times are hard. Why don't you help her yourself?"

"She won't take anything from me."

"You haven't been able to make any headway with her, eh? She's different from the ones you used to have flocking around you."

"Damn you, Trem—"

Wingate lifted a hand, laughing once more. "Calm down, bucko. I'll see if I can do anything. Have you reported your stock loss to the sheriff over in Peyote?"

"No. It's something I'll handle myself."

"Better get set, then. Bogard will be back. He's a pretty old buck for Julia, but he's had his eye on her for a long time."

"Better watch your talk, Trem."

Wingate gave Vail a sardonic look. "Getting strait-laced all of a sudden, aren't you? You must be getting edgy out here."

The editor was right about that. After the buggy had wheeled away down the valley, John Vail puttered restlessly about headquarters. He was waiting, and he was edgy. Bogard would be back. Vail couldn't afford to lose any more stock, but for once in his life he was more concerned about someone else than he was about himself. He was concerned about Julia Karns. And this waiting was hell.

There was two more days of it; and then, one morning, she came to him. He was riding out along his valley and had just passed some knolls that rose from its grassy floor, when he saw her distant figure. She was riding down the road that came in over the hills to the west. She was riding fast, and was waving to catch Vail's attention.

He reined up. Things had settled into a fixed pattern here on the ranch, with Skellar and himself watching the cattle during the night and Goss and Scott taking the rifles and standing guard in the daytime. Vail was riding out now, as he did every day, to make sure that the surly hardcases were on the job. But that could wait. Filled with an eagerness to see Julia again, Vail cut over through the line of cottonwoods and rode up to meet her.

"Vail," she exclaimed as she reined up, "they're saying that Max took your stock."

Vail only nodded.

"He hasn't been back," she said, lamely.

"You've been expecting him back," Vail said, "in spite of what you told me that night."

"I suppose so, yes. He's stubborn about things. He tried to get me to divorce Ben and marry him, right after Ben was sent to prison. I thought I'd made it clear to him that I wouldn't, but he kept hammering at me, and in that last big row I had to threaten him with the rifle. I'd never had to go that far before." Her eyes scanned Vail's face. "What I want you to know, Vail, is that the rustling wasn't done on my orders."

"I didn't think it was. You've lathered your horse, riding up here. Better take him over in the shade of the trees and let him cool off."

They rode under one of the giant cottonwoods, Vail stepping down from his saddle and extending his arms to help Julia dismount. She avoided him, got down without help, and seated herself on the grass.

"It's cool here, and everything is so green in this valley," she murmured, looking about. "This is a beautiful place. You're lucky to have a ranch like this, Mr. Vail, and a fine house to live in."

"I haven't moved into the house yet. What you really mean, though, is that I don't deserve all this."

She looked at him squarely. "You don't, but I wasn't thinking of that. I was thinking about my husband. Ben always wanted fine things, and was restless because we couldn't have them. If only we could have owned something like this, then perhaps he—" She broke off, glancing away and catching her lip between her teeth.

She was telling Vail to keep his distance, with this talk of her husband. That angered him. It was a foolish thing, but suddenly Vail was jealous of a man who wasn't here, and never could be again.

He said roughly, "Owning some certain thing or other doesn't change what people are like inside."

"Is that some more of your wise old friend's talk?" Laughing a little, she lifted her hands to stroke her windblown hair back into place.

The gesture emphasized the ripe roundness of her breasts under her thin blouse. She saw the alert male interest in Vail's eyes, and she lowered her arms instantly. "You took Ben to Yuma," she said tightly. "You must have gotten to know him, a little, on that trip. So you know how fine he is, Mr. Vail."

"Yes." If she wanted to be formal, he could be formal too. But it wasn't fair to her, to keep herself withdrawn from life as she was doing. "Look, Mrs. Karns, you've been fooling yourself. You gave yourself away when you got that notion of killing me."

"What on earth do you mean, Vail?"

"You've worked hard at being the dutiful wife, pretending that you think your husband didn't rob Follis. But it won't wash. Maybe you fooled yourself into believing he was innocent, but deep down you didn't believe it at any time."

SHE gave him a scornful look. "If they taught you mind-reading, wherever it was you learned your filthy trade, they didn't do a very good job."

"I didn't need anything like that. All you thought about was getting even with me for sending Ben away. It never occurred to you to try to clear him, did it? But it would have, Julia, if you'd really believed in him."

She drew a swift, deep breath. "Vail, I—"

"There's more to it than that," he persisted harshly. "The other night at your place, you thought I'd settled here to wait for you to dig up the bank's money from wherever Ben hid it. If I'd framed him as you claimed, you'd know it couldn't be there."

Her eyes took on a trapped, stricken look. "Vail, I wouldn't doubt Ben for a—" Her voice broke. "That wasn't fair of you at all!" she cried, turning away from him.

She knew, now. Vail seized her shoulders and forced her around to face him. "You don't believe in him," he told her, aware even now that he was trying to beat down his own doubts as well as convince her. "You can't go on trying to be loyal to a man who's a thief and a killer."

Her head lolled back, lips parted. "You devil!" she breathed. "You're right, I suppose. I guess I knew all along that Ben did it. But it doesn't change anything," she added fiercely. "I won't let it. I'm still Ben's wife."

Having her so close to him, warmly beautiful and desirable, angering him by being stubborn, was too much for John Vail. He crushed her against him, kissing her in a violent and demanding way.

For a moment her dark eyes opened wide with fury. Her mouth writhed beneath his as she struggled to get free. "Let me go!" she gasped. "You bounty hunter, I'm not—"

Then her mouth softened suddenly, clung to his. Her hands, which had been tiny fists beating against him, crept around his back. She was all woman now, meeting him with an ardor that matched his own; an experienced woman, who knew all about love. Vail's pulse hammered exultantly at her response.

He ended the kiss at last, releasing her. She gave him one odd, straight look and then turned away, covering her face with her hands, not crying, just sitting there.

"Julia," he said.

"Don't touch me again, please. What sort of woman am I, to enjoy having a man make love to me while poor Ben is in jail?"

"You're no hussy," he said, tightly, looking at her and feeling a pang of sympathy for her. She wasn't like most of the women he

had known, women who hadn't worried about the rightness of things. There was an eternal conflict in women like Julia. And Vail, having struck through her defenses so that she betrayed herself to him, now felt lowdown and mean. "This isn't what you think it is," he told her. "This was meant to be, and there's no use either of us fighting it."

She gave him a long, searching glance and then looked away again. "John, I've fought against it, truly I have—ever since the first time I saw you, in that courtroom. I know a lot about you, Vail. Women talk among themselves about such matters, you know. Much of it is just gossip, but—" She paused. "I suppose women have always asked men this question: am I just another conquest to you?"

"I told you it isn't like that. Julia, you've got to believe me, this one time."

Her face had a tight, sad look. "If only we had met long ago, before I got married. Ben was always good to me, as good as any woman could ask. I married him because I was lonely. That's a foolish reason, isn't it? But it's done, and now that he's down, I can't turn on him. John, what are we going to do?"

The crash of the distant rifle shots struck at their ears then. Vail leaped up, looking past the cottonwood bole and on out across his range. He saw mounted men—a dozen of them, he estimated, without taking time to count them—sweeping down toward the part of the valley where the cattle were. It must be an attack—in broad daylight.

"Stay here in the trees," he told Julia Karns, and leaped into his saddle.

The two no-goods from Tucson were putting up only a half-hearted resistance when Vail pounded toward the spooked cattle. Goss and Scott had drawn together, shooting off the Winchesters without dismounting to take aim.

Vail quartered toward them, rising in his stirrups to search the surrounding part of the valley for the attackers. The gunfire had slackened now; but from the direction Goss and Scott were facing, Vail judged that the raiders had forted up behind the low knolls that lay about a mile to the east of the watercourse.

That notion was confirmed when a bullet sped past him with a dying whine. Controlling the frightened black horse, he searched for the source of the bullet. He saw a straw-sombreroed head lift cautiously into view atop one of the knolls. Bogard had brought along some help with him, from Mexico.

They started shooting at Vail in earnest now, from several of the knolls. Cold fear tightened Vail's belly muscles. In order to reach Goss and Scott, he would have to continue in the direction he was headed, and that would carry him well within rifle range of the knolls. Forced to give up his original idea, he swerved aside and headed on down the valley. The shooting died away.

He puzzled over this attack, which was a crazy thing, on the face of it. Wanting the rest of the herd, Bogard should have hit Spanish Ranch at night, as he had done before, when the light wouldn't be good for the defenders' shooting.

Vail had learned long ago, however, that men like Bogard often went at things in foolish ways. A man who turned criminal was a fool to start out with. Vail's chief advantage against such a one had always been his use of cold and merciless logic.

That wasn't of much use now. It only pointed up the fact that he was shut out, forced away from his milling cattle and from those rifles of his. With only a sixgun, he couldn't hope to fight his way through before being cut down.

BY GOING farther down the valley and circling back against the foot of the mountains, though, he might reach his men. He was spurring his horse to a faster gait when he looked swiftly back, his attention drawn by a sudden new outburst of gunfire.

Goss and Scott hadn't done that; they had stopped shooting and had dismounted to put the bodies of their horses between themselves and the knolls. Vail was out of range, so the raiders weren't shooting at him. They were shooting at Lew Skellar.

The old hand had come down the valley from the direction of headquarters, riding fast. Skellar had thought the trouble was where the cattle were, and had started past the knolls

without paying much attention to them, during the lull in the firing. Skellar was caught. armed only with a sixgun, he threw a couple of ineffectual shots at the knolls and then swung off toward his left, trying to reach the cottonwood, which would give him some cover.

He didn't make it. His body reeled suddenly in the saddle. Then his horse screamed and went down. The cowhand rolled over and over in a cloud of dust, scrambled toward the kicking, dying animal, and then thought better of it and made a stumbling run to a little gully, into which he disappeared.

Without thinking, Vail reined the black over and spurred across the valley, splashing through the creek under the trees and then turning upstream. Julia Karns gave him a frightened look when he passed her. Then, after getting into a position opposite Skellar, Vail headed directly east once more, toward the knolls, which now were beyond the trees.

Dismounting when he reached the creek this time, he ran forward afoot. Rifle fire broke out once more, the bullets snarling past him, some of them kicking up dirt into his face. But he reached the gully, jumped down into it, and knelt at Skellar's side.

The old hand gave him a sparse grin. His shirt was soaked, under his right armpit and down his back, with blood. "I heard the shooting," Skellar said, his furrowed face set against his pain. "You'd think a man that's been around as long as I have would have more sense than to go ramming into something without looking all around."

"Let's see how badly you're hit, Lew."

Vail got out his knife and slit the blood-soaked cloth. The bullet had struck Skellar just under his arm and had emerged again below his shoulder blade. Some ribs must have been smashed, and the dribble of crimson at one corner of the cowhand's mouth told of a punctured lung. Vail sat back on his heels, swearing angrily.

"Damn it, Lew, you didn't have to buy into this!"

"I'm still on your payroll." Skellar gave him a quizzical look and added, "Why'd you come back over here?"

"To do this."

Vail took out a clean bandanna and began tearing it into strips to roll up to plug Skellar's wound. It wasn't much, but it was the best he could do for the present.

The old hand gave a jeering chuckle. "I always heard that John Vail was a cold devil who worked alone and would cross anybody if it would help him get what he was after."

"Hold still, Lew. We'll get you out of here."

Skellar winced as Vail plugged the wound. The firing had died away again; the valley was a place of silence, except for the pound of running hoofs. It sounded like two horses, Vail thought, rising to take a swift look around.

No one fired at him from the knolls. A man was riding swiftly away from them, circling toward the south to cross the watercourse and get over on the west side of the valley. Another was doing the same thing to the north, unhampered by the Winchesters in the hands of Goss and Scott. When this move was finished Vail and the wounded man would be trapped, their way of escape cut off.

Skellar had struggled up to a standing position and was looking out past the knolls. "There go your two tough hands," he said, nodding toward the dwindling figures of Goss and Scott, who were riding up the slope of the mountains. "They're quitting us flat, and taking the rifles with 'em!"

Vail swore again, and looked back toward the cottonwoods. Julia Karns had left them and was riding back over the hills toward her own ranch. He was glad that she was getting out of it, and yet a feeling of loneliness struck at him like a blow. A man who stood alone, relying on no one else for help and helping no one, had things simple. John Vail had gotten himself involved with other people now. Worry about them wrapped itself around his mind.

Bogard might leave his crew to take the cattle, and follow Julia himself. And Lew had to be gotten out of here and down to the doctor in Peralta. A bullet twanged past Vail's head. He ducked down.

"They just want to pin us here, Lew, till they've taken the cattle. Then they'll pull out, and we'll get you to the doctor."

"Yeah? They picked a peculiar time for

their rustling, for a fact." Skellar lifted his gray head to look up at the knolls. "They're having some sort of powwow up there. They're out of sixgun range, too. And damn it, I lost my gun when that horse was killed under me."

Skellar was getting a drawn and feverish look. "Better sit down, Lew," Vail said.

Skellar sank down. Vail watched both the knolls and the line of trees, but no one came within sixgun range in either direction. The quiet lasted for perhaps an hour. Then someone shouted from the knolls. Men spurred down-slope, shooting as they came.

Vail fired back, lifting his head quickly to trigger a shot and then dodging to a new position for the next one. A rider yelled and pitched out of his saddle. The rest of them broke away and circled back to the knolls, leaving the downed man where he was.

Vail felt a tug on his arm, and whipped around. Skellar was on his feet again, pointing unsteadily toward the cottonwoods. The two who had crossed the creek were coming out of the trees afoot, stealing forward with the intention of taking Vail by surprise from that direction. He fired a them. They scrambled back into cover.

"I don't get this," he muttered, as he thrust fresh shells into the hot cylinder of his gun. "They can take the cattle any time they want, now, and yet they keep hanging around."

Skellar's wheezing chuckle interrupted him. "It isn't the cows they want this time, Johnny boy. It's your hide they're after."

VAIL scowled. That didn't make sense, unless Bogard wanted Julia Karns badly enough to kill Vail to put him out of the way. Vail shook his head to that. It was too thin; Julia wasn't his woman yet.

The day ran on, with the sun wheeling slowly over toward the hills on the western side of the valley. A man rode out of the knolls and circled far around to get to the trees. After a time he rode back again, picking up the horse of the fallen man at the spot where the animal had stopped running.

"Those are brave boys," Skellar said, "each wanting some other feller to stop your lead. This place is like a fort, and they know it."

Skellar was right in his sizing-up of this gully, which was deep and steep-walled and crooked. Even from the tops of the knolls Bogard couldn't shoot down into it. A man could do that only by approaching to the very edge of it.

"Why in hell are they after me?" Vail said angrily.

"Who knows?" Skellar said. "I've heard that a lot of men would like to get at you, if they had the guts for the job. But like I told you once, I judge a man for myself. This time I'm stumped. I see a man standing here, and he doesn't fit the name that's been put to him."

John Vail shrugged. He never had talked about his life to any man, but he did so now, here in this narrow gully that was both a fort and a trap.

"Bounty hunter fits me, Lew—though I never could see anything very much wrong with it before. Somebody had to go after the tough ones that the law couldn't handle by itself. If men like Sam Follis wanted to pay me well for pulling the outlaws off their necks, what was wrong with taking their money?"

"I'm listening," Skellar said, wiping crimson from his mouth, "not arguing."

"I got into it in a simple way, Lew. My folks had a Butterfield stage station over at the north end of the Dragoon Mountains. The Apaches got them one night, tortured them and killed them. I was sixteen at the time and I got away and went over to Fort Bowie. I hired on as an Army scout, lying about my age. After a couple of years of that I joined the Army. I knew the country, knew the Apaches. In the Apache campaigns I got some battlefield promotions, and was a captain at twenty-five.

"I was the smart-aleck all along, always telling somebody off. When some politicians came out from Washington, I told them what I thought of their ideas on the subject of fighting Apaches, and pretty soon I was out of the Army.

"I wasn't good for any damn thing except fighting, Lew. When I blistered my hands

trying to make that branding iron the other day, it was the first time in my life I ever did anything useful with them. But I didn't look at it that way when the Army kicked me out. I was smart, too smart to work for wages like other men did. A man from the governor's office came to see me and asked me to go after an outlaw. It was good pay, but I saw a reward poster somewhere along the way, so I collected that too.

"I went on from there. It was easy life, and an interesting one, I thought. To myself I was a little tin hero, protecting the weak ones the law couldn't protect. If they wanted to snarl about my taking money for risking my hide, let them. I could get along by myself."

"Then why'd you settle down here?"

"I found out I'd been fooling myself, Lew. Maybe I grew up a little, inside. A wise old man once told me that there was more to living than just coasting along on the plush. And so I made a reach for something I'd been missing."

"For Julia Karns, maybe," Skellar said dryly. "And it got you this."

The afternoon seemed endless. Bogard's crew lurked among the knolls and in the cottonwoods, unwilling to risk themselves, knowing that John Vail's gun would get some more of them if they made another attack.

Skellar was weakening fast. His face had an ashy look that scared John Vail. The wound was clotting and the flow of blood had stopped, but the heat of the day and the shock of the wound were beginning to tell. Vail had been waiting for dark, but he couldn't wait any longer. What was happening inside Skellar's wound might be bad.

Vail thought that if he could reach the cottonwoods and get his horse, along with one of those belonging to the men who waited for him there, he might make it back to the gully and get Lew out of this. It was a risky thing to try, a crazy thing, the sort of thing he had never chanced in past days. He had taken some risks then, but always at a time and in a way that was of his own choosing. Now that Lew Skellar might be dying, he couldn't pick and choose and play safe.

He darted down the gully until its walls flattened out. Then he was in the open, running toward the trees. A triumphant shout broke from the knolls. Rifle fire drowned it out. Bullets sang past Vail as he ran, dodging crookedly to make of himself as poor a target as possible.

He got beyond range of accurate rifle fire. The two men who were among the trees began shooting at him. Stopping to take aim, he squeezed off a shot, coldly precise about this, and dropped one of them. The other one, a Mexican who probably hadn't bargained for this tight a thing, leaped onto his horse and raced away.

Vail reached the trees, and saw that the man he had shot was the one known as Blackie. He was dead. Vail turned away from him. All he needed now was to find his own horse and get back to Lew—and get killed, probably, trying such a foolish thing.

THE sound of many running hoofs came to him then. Looking up past some brush, he saw riders stringing down out of the hills to the west. Some of them were townsmen—Trem Wingate, the storekeeper, and a lot of others. And there were still more, who had the look of cowhands and would be from the neighboring ranches. Julia Karns was with them.

Vail craned a look around toward the knolls. Bogard had seen these people. With his remaining crew he was fleeing toward the mountains. This thing was over and done with.

The men from Peralta didn't look at John Vail with any liking. They had come to help him, but not so much on his account, as on Julia's. By what magic of feminine pleading she had recruited them Vail didn't know, but he was grateful to them and said so.

"Lew Skellar is in a gully over there," he told them. "He's been shot. We'll have to put him on a horse and get him to the doctor. There's another man down too, just beyond Lew."

Julia reined her mount through the group to reach Vail's side. "John, are you all right?"

He nodded, sharply aware of the sly look that Wingate had given her at her use of Vail's given name. The bunch from Peralta split up, the townsmen following Vail to the wounded men, cowboys spurring on across the valley in pursuit of Bogard.

The man who had been left in the sun was the kid who answered to the name of Dude. He had a belly wound, the kind that brings a man to a lingering death. The look on his face said he knew about that.

Vail bent over him, saying, "Why did Bogard come after me?"

The kid looked up with hate-filled eyes. "Find out for yourself, bounty hunter!"

Doc Treadwell, in Peralta, was a dour little man who came out at last from his back room, wiping blood from his hands and forearms with a towel. "Your man will make out all right, Vail," he said shortly.

Vail glanced toward Julia Karns, who had waited all this time with him. "How about the kid?" he asked then.

The doctor shrugged. "I've done what I can. If people like you could see what a bullet does to a man's insides, you'd never touch another gun."

Vail got up, not saying anything. Taking Julia's arm, he led her outside. It was early morning now, with the coolness of dawn in the air.

"Better go to the hotel, Julia," Vail said gently, "and get some rest."

She gave him a searching look. "John, you're planning to do something. It shows in your face. What is it?"

"Bogard tried to get me, and I don't know why. I'm going after him."

"He did it because of—us. He thought it was on your account that I turned him down. But John, why risk yourself now?"

"I should have been an Indian, girl. I've always banked on my hunches and I've got one now, one that says I'm close to something. Bogard's acted queer all through this. He might let those cowboys chase his crew through the mountains while he doubles back. If he did that, where might he hole up?"

Julia bit her lip. "Well, there's that line cabin at the lower end of our range. It hasn't been used since the dry spell, but Max often stayed there overnight on his way home from poker games here in town. The cabin is just up the canyon from that little bridge over Dry Creek." She broke off, turning to face John Vail. "Please don't go out there. I've got a feeling too, a strange one. It's as if I were losing you."

"I've got to go," he told her, gently.

The line cabin was dark when Vail approached it. He saw no horses around it, no sign of life. Drawing his gun, he moved forward in silence and kicked open the door. The cabin was empty. Striking matches, Vail looked around at the straw-filled bunks, at the rusty little stove.

There was nothing here. He turned to leave and then struck by the thought that Bogard might have been here but had left when he heard a horse approaching, he felt of the stove.

It was cold. There was no reason for a fire anyway, since there was no food in the cabin. Idly he lifted a lid, looked into the firebox, and saw that the grate had been scraped clean of ashes. Too clean. He opened the ash door and pulled out the box.

On top of the ashes were fragments of something that looked like fabric. They were ashes too, one of them crumbled when he touched it. But they showed the texture of cloth, even the pattern of stripes that had been in it. It was the sort of cloth from which bank money sacks were made.

He straightened. There had been no need of a fire in here for a long time, during the hot weather. The money sack had been burned and its ashes scraped carefully from the grate. But the testimony at the trial had proved that Ben Karns had not come this way at all, after the robbery, but had gone out of Peralta in the opposite direction, toward Silverbell.

Vail went back to Peralta. The doctor informed him, tetsily, that Dude wouldn't be out of the chloroform for hours yet.

"I've got to talk to him," Vail said. "I'll wait in there with him.

It was nearly noon when the kid began to stir on his cot. Vail had been talking to Lew Skellar, who occupied the other cot; now he turned round and bent over the kid.

"Dude, can you hear me?"

Pain-dulled eyes looked up at him. "What are you doing here? Where's the doc?" Dude twisted on his cot, looking wildly around.

"He went out for some breakfast. You can pull through, kid. Just lie still."

"That's what you want, isn't it? For me to pull through so you can jail me for rustling."

"I'm out of that business, kid. Whether you go to jail or not is up to you. Stick with Bogard and you'll do time."

"That dirty—" The kid's mouth twisted. His brain still was dulled by the chloroform, but the hate that was in him sent a spasm through his body. When Dude looked up again it was with an expression of sly superiority. "I can put a rope around that bastard's neck any time I want," he said.

"That's for you to decide."

VAIL had found out that people were more likely to tell you things when they thought you were aloof and not much caring whether they talked or not. Let them know your anxiety, and they tightened right up and became defensive.

"Yeah," the kid breathed. "Me, the one he left lying out there in the sun, I'm the one who can hang him!"

"For that bank robbery, eh?"

The kid's head jerked up. "How'd you know that?"

"I know a lot about it, kid. Bogard got that money. I even know where he burned the sack it was in."

"Yeah." The kid lolled weakly back. "He got it all right. I've been watching him ever since waiting for— But he's careful, damn him. He didn't sit in on the poker game that night. He claimed he had a belly-ache, and would stay home. But he didn't stay there. I didn't play either, just watched the game for awhile.

"When I went out I saw that Ben Karns's flashy pinto had been moved from the saloon tie-rail to the one up at the bank. Ben hadn't left the game yet, so I got to wondering who'd moved his horse. Then I saw Max dodge into the space between the bank and the building next to it. That was when I eased into the alley so I could watch him."

Vail was thinking back to the testimony at the trial. Ben Karns hadn't been able to explain how his horse had gotten moved; that had been one of the things which convinced the jury he was lying. Everything he said had sounded lame.

"What then, kid?" Vail prompted.

"I got it all figured out." The kid's eyes held a fevered light now; at another time he might not have talked like this, but his brain was doped and twisted with hate at present. "Max knew that Ben never had much money to gamble with, and generally lost it early in the game and then pulled out.

"Max watched till Ben came out of the saloon. Ben was kind of drunk, and fumbled around among the horses looking for his, and finally saw the pinto way up at the bank. When he started up there, Max went into the bank by the back door. I saw him plain, in the moonlight. Then there was a shot, and the teller yelled. Max busted out the back, got on his horse, and went off down the alley, mighty quiet, just before Ben went in the bank.

"Then everybody who had heard the shot came spilling out of the saloon, and I joined up with the crowd. I kept real quiet, figuring that sometime I'd find a way to put the squeeze on Max for some of that money. But he never let on he knew a thing about it."

"How did Max get some of the money into Ben's saddlebag, kid?"

"I have a fair idea. A couple of days after the robbery Mrs. Karns was crying and carrying on, and she asked Max to take some grub and try to get it to Ben. I don't know how Max found him, but Max was gone more'n a week. He came back without the grub, looking wise.

"I figure he slipped the money into Ben's gear when he found him someplace. Max must have figured it was worth the thousand to tie Ben up so Max would be in the clear with the rest of the money." The kid gave Vail a look of malice. "Now you have to give back that reward you collected, don't you?"

Vail hadn't thought of that. He shrugged

and turned to leave the room, and saw Lew Skellar's seamy old face watching him. Skellar knew what was beginning to stir in Vail's mind. Skellar had seen Julia Karns out at the ranch at the beginning of the fight, and must have guessed that she had gone there to see Vail.

Vail went on out to the street, deep in thought. It had been simple, the way Bogard had sewed up Ben Karns—for money, and for a woman. Bogard had known Karns well, had known how Karns would react when he realized that the teller with whom he had quarreled was dead. Karns was weak and easily frightened. Bogard had taken a long chance on that, but he had won.

Bogard must have been badly frightened when Vail came back to Peralta and bought Spanish Ranch. With the crafty but crossed-up reasoning of a criminal's mind he must have thought that the ranching was a pretext, done in order to give Vail an excuse to keep watching him, and some day follow him to the money. So Bogard had tried to get rid of Vail. Finally, when all else had failed, Bogard had tried to make an open fight of it. That hadn't worked out for him either.

Vail could keep quiet about all this. The wounded kid in there would probably die. Lew Skellar, who had heard all of it, would be another matter; the cocky and independent old cowhand couldn't be bought off. He would have to be handled in some other way.

Vail was aghast at the course of his thinking was taking now. But that would be a way to keep Spanish Ranch and to have Julia for himself. It was a temptation. Ben Karns would be kept in Yuma prison, out of the way for as long as he lived. Karns was a likeable lightweight, not good for much, no good at all for Julia.

Vail passed a hand across his eyes, suddenly realizing that he was bone-tired. He wanted Julia more than he had ever wanted anything but to get her he had to leave a man in prison, a man who had done nothing wrong except to let himself be stampeded by fear.

That was the hell of it. The rest of someone else's life was the price of what John Vail wanted for himself. When a man tried to fit himself into the world of people he got himself enmeshed with their lives and hopes, and he wasn't his own man any more.

If Julia Karns, out of her bitterness and her anger, had concocted a private hell for John Vail, it could have been nothing worse than this. He saw her now, coming down the steps of the hotel, looking fresh and clean in the light of the new day. And he knew, immediately, what he was going to do.

SHE came to him swiftly, saying, "John, what's happened? You're so pale."

He told her, then, roughly and in a low, savage voice. "Ben didn't rob the bank and kill Sansom. Bogard did it."

Her dark eyes lifted to scan his face. Comprehension seemed to come to her but slowly. Ben had been so obviously guilty; she had adjusted her thinking to that, as everyone had. And now something within her seemed to hold comprehension back, like a wall that crumbled reluctantly.

He clamped his hands on her arms. "Don't you understand? Dude talked. He may die before he can testify, but Lew heard it. And I've got other evidence. Send a telegram to the county seat and get the sheriff over here."

"John, what are you going to do?"

His hands dropped, not touching her any more. "There's only one thing to do. I'm going to Phoenix, and then to Yuma."

"Yes." Her voice seemed to come from a distance. "Of course you must. You're a fine person after all, John Vail."

Vail was well known in the Territorial capital. People listened to him there, and relied upon his word. "A natural mistake," the governor said as he signed a pardon for Ben Karns, "but not of your doing, John. Your job ended when you took Karns in for trial; it was the prosecutor and the court that fell down. None of us can be right all the time. And don't let your connection with this matter get under your hide, now. You've done more for the Territory than any man I can name and, as I said, you merely did your job this time. That banker down in Peralta demanded that we send the best

man we could get, and we sent you."

Maybe that was true, the part about Vail's having done something for the Territory. But he hadn't done anything for John Vail. All he had to show for his years as a man-hunter was an empty future, and the empty thanks of a politician.

Sam Follis made a grandstand play of loaning Karns money to restock the Box K. Follis didn't take back Spanish Ranch, either; he said that the place needed a competent man to run it, one who'd have an owner's interest in making it go. But he was careful to increase the amount of Vail's mortgage by five thousand dollars.

Vail could have argued that point, since the hasty pardon didn't change the fact that arrest and conviction had been obtained. But he didn't. Maybe he wasn't the same John Vail any more.

He did try to find the bank's money. He tore up the Box K line cabin, but did not find anything there. Bogard had gotten away from the Peralta cowhands and hadn't been seen since. The law went through the motions of looking for him, then sent out reward posters and sat back to wait.

Follis was more cautious about the amount of the reward this time, putting up only a thousand dollars. Vail chuckled over that, and didn't go out to earn the money. He was through with that sort of thing. And no doubt Bogard was down in Mexico somewhere, and would be hard to find. But if he had hidden the bank's money somewhere around Peralta, he would be back for it one day. Vail had a hunch about that.

Things went along smoothly at Spanish Ranch. Vail moved up into the house. Lew Skellar bossed the two new hands Vail had hired, and sometimes Vail suspected that Skellar bossed him as well. At any rate, Vail learned the cattle business. Getting the respect of his neighbors would be a longer pull, but it would come.

Ben Karns, a stocky man with a handsome irresolute face, came up to Spanish Ranch quite often. He didn't hold anything against Vail. On the trip back from Yuma he had told Vail that Bogard had found him, after the robbery, in an abandoned mine tunnel up near Globe. Karns had worked in that mine once, before it closed down; Bogard had known about that and had looked for him there. The puncher known as Dude had recovered, after long weeks of care in Doc Treadwell's back room, and now was working for Karns again.

Ben often said, "I don't understand it, John. I can't get you to visit us, and Julia won't come up here with me. There's no use in you two holding grudges like that. Julia wasn't herself the time she decided to kill you, and you were only doing your job when you took me in. I've tried to make her see it that way, but still she holds back."

Vail knew the reason for that. Julia was trying to spare him, and herself as well. He knew, as surely as a man can know anything, that she loved him with the same fierce yearning that was in him. And yet she went on with her old way of life. Maybe she regarded it as her duty. Maybe she was making amends for having doubted her husband.

Vail stayed up here, in the empty shell called Spanish Ranch. This could be punishment, he sometimes thought. Maybe life had its own ways of getting even with a man.

The next blow came suddenly and without warning. Ben came to visit one night, walking in through the open door of the house as he had become accustomed to doing, and found Vail sitting in the moonlit patio.

"Evening, John."

"Howdy, Ben. Did you get any of that rain down there?"

"A lot of it. The oldtimers claim the dry spell is broken now, and with the price of beef going up like it is we'll all be out of the woods in a year or two. First thing I'm going to do is look around for a couple of Arabian horses, one for me and one for Julia. Then I'll buy her a carriage. She had to stay home and do some sewing for a bazaar the women are having down in Peralta, but she said to tell you hello."

Vail nodded. Ben would never guess the truth; he was too shallow for that, too wrapped up in his almost boyish plans for the future. But Vail had a feeling of sneakiness that he didn't like. He kept telling

himself that there hadn't been anything really wrong between himself and Julia Karns. They had kept rigidly apart ever since Ben had returned from Yuma. Wasn't that enough?

No, it wasn't. The pull that lay between them was a strong thing and a dangerous one. Maybe Vail should let go of Spanish Ranch and leave here. But he knew he would stay, held by the hunch he had about Bogard. If the man came back, Ben and Julia Karns might need help.

In past times Vail would have counted that as a joke, his staying around to help another man keep the woman Vail wanted for himself. Yet there was a new depth to his feelings now; he wanted what was best for Julia, not just for himself. And for Ben Karns, too. He had gotten to be friends with Ben. Maybe this was part of his new life, but Vail had come to realize that you had to accept people for what they were, and make allowances for their weaknesses.

BEN was a good talker. Over a game of checkers in the patio, the two men discussed range conditions, cattle breeding, a dozen other things that had no particular depth to them.

Then they heard a horse come pounding up the hill. A voice called out, "Ben! John!"

It was Julia's voice. Almost before they could get to their feet, she came running through the house and out into the patio. Her dress was torn and her hair was disheveled. Her eyes had a wild, terrified look.

"Max has come back!" she gasped. "He came to the ranch, right into the house, and got the Winchester. I was sewing in the kitchen, and when I heard someone in the parlor I ran out there, and he struck me. Dude heard us fighting, I guess; he came up to the house, and Max killed him. Then Max went out to the well. He had the money hidden there, I think, because he lifted a little wooden box out of the curbing. I ran to the corral and got on one of the horses. He shot at me then, and I think he followed me here."

She lifted her face, looking straight at John Vail, wanting him to help.

"I'll get him," Vail said. "Keep her here, Ben. Steady her."

He went to his room, which opened on the main hallway, and took his gunbelt from the chair back where it hung. After buckling it about him, he searched around in the dark for his gun, which he had taken apart several days ago for cleaning and oiling. The gun was on the table somewhere, but he couldn't locate it by feel amid the bachelor clutter of magazines and tobacco cans and such. He got out a match and stroked it against the door jamb for light.

The hard muzzle of a gun jabbed his back then. "Hold still!" a man's voice ordered.

It was Max Bogard. Vail could hear the man's breathing now, close behind him. The flickering light of the match showed him his own gun; it was on the far corner of the table, well out of reach.

"You come up mighty quiet, Max," Vail said.

"Yeah. The Karns woman kept looking back, but she followed the road. Ever notice how a woman'll always follow a road? I cut across the hills and was almost up to your house, afoot, when she rode in. Where are the Karnses now?"

"In the patio." Vail was wondering why Bogard was stalling about what he must be planning to do.

"All right. I've got you, bucko—the great manhunter, trapped cold in his own house."

Vail felt a stab of fear. "You don't want Julia, Max. It would slow you down, trying to take a woman along. You've got your money now, so why not just leave here?"

"Nobody said I wanted her any more. Down in Mexico a man with a little money can be a big stick. I was tempted some when I saw her again tonight, but I decided against it. I've been worrying about your stumbling onto the money, Vail. Besides, I needed it. I have it on my saddle now, so there's just one thing more." Bogard let that sink in for a few seconds.

Vail stood rigid. The match had burned out in his hand; the room was in darkness now except for the faint light that came down the long hallway from the patio. This, he thought, was the way a condemned man felt.

Bogard had wanted him to feel this way. Vail wasn't going to plead.

"You're a careful man, Max," he said. "Real careful. You're not going to be around to get between me and the border tonight—not when I have eight thousand dollars on me."

Bogard's breath made a faint hissing sound. He wasn't a bold one, and he had to steel himself for this. Vail poised to whirl around, useless though it would be to fight barehanded against a cocked gun. Then Ben Karns's shout reached down the hall. "Bogard!"

The killer was half into the doorway of Vail's room, half outside it. He shoved against Vail, trying to get fully into the room and thus be shielded. Vail resisted, knowing the hazard of that but wanting to keep Bogard concerned about his own hide. He coldly blocked the man.

"Bogard!" Ben Karns called again. "Keep out of this, John; he's my turkey. Bogard, you framed me. Now turn around so I can shoot you."

Only a fool would have called out thus, warning the intruder. A man like Ben, full of weaknesses, should have shot Bogard in the back without making a sound first. But the weak are never wise.

Bogard might well have triggered a shot into Vail, but he didn't. He was uncertain now, afraid of Ben Karns and not knowing what to do first. Vail felt the pressure of the gun suddenly release and sensed that Bogard was whirling around to face Ben. The unarmed man was the lesser danger, Bogard had decided.

Guns spoke almost in unison in the hallway. Vail's clutching hand reached out and found his own weapon in the dark. It wasn't even loaded. He thumbed shells into it and came around with the old, incredible speed, tilting the weapon up and cocking it as he brought it down again.

Bogard was out in the hallway. He was hit and sagging a little as he wheeled back toward Vail. Vail fired. The impact of the slug drove Bogard against the wall, where he fell in a lifeless heap.

Vail stepped out into the hall. Against the moonlight in the patio he saw the crumpled figure of Ben Karns, lying on the tiles out there. Karns was dying when Vail got to him. Julia was there, not crying, crouched over her husband and looking up at Vail with eyes that begged him to do something. There was nothing he could do.

Ben Karns said in a ragged whisper, "John, I owed him that. Julia—take care of Jul. . ." And then he was dead.

Vail lifted Julia to her feet, a real regret running strongly within him. He hadn't wanted Ben to die. Somewhere outside there was a sound of running boots. Skellar and the cowhands must have heard the shooting, and were coming up the hill. It was good to have the people around you, people who would always help in any way they possibly could.

"He was brave," Julia said sadly. "Poor Ben."

Vail put an arm across her shoulders, steadying her. It wasn't proper to speak about the future now. But in time the scars of the past would be erased, and for the two of them the future would be a full one, and secure.

INDIAN WOOING

WHEN a Ute Indian brave wished to woo a girl he would kill a deer and take it to the wickiup (hut) of the girl of his choice. According to custom, he would enter her home, but would pay no attention to her.

If she decided not to marry him it was her duty to ignore him. However, if she had decided that she wanted to become his bride she would go out to his horse. After watering and feeding the horse, she would unstrap the deer, care for the meat and skin, then cook some of the meat and invite her lover to eat.

That is all there was to their courtship. They were now man and wife, and could be parted only by death or divorce.

——Burton H. Wollenzien

From open doorways, dark impassive eyes watched the two riders

Back Track

By H. A. DeRosso

AT HIGH noon they rode out of the timber. Below them, at the edge of the small plain, lay the village, its tan jacals seeming unreal and toy-like at this distance.

"San Miguel," Llano Lane said. "It's nine years since you've been here, Dave, isn't it?"

Recollection brought no nostalgia to Dave Merritt, not yet. "About that long," he said.

"That was after the S.P. job, wasn't it?" Llano Lane said. "We were here a month. It was a nice place to lay low in."

"Let's hope it still is," Merritt said.

Lane threw Merritt a look. "The only time a lawman comes to San Miguel is to collect the taxes. What are you so jumpy about?"

Don't you know, Merritt thought—especially after how badly things went at Spencer-

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MERRITT WISHED he never had to give his daughter anything he had stolen . . . but he was too close to death to change his way of living

ville? We're close to the coming of the end. Don't you feel it, too? Aloud he said nothing.

Lane shifted his weight in the saddle. A hand rose and rubbed his craggy nose. "I wonder if they still remember us."

"No one ever forgets Llano Lane," Merritt said.

A little bitterness crept into his voice, but it was not intended for the man as much as for the situation. He felt Lane's sharp look again.

"Forget Spencerville," Lane said. "There's just the two of us now, but we make a good team. We'll have our days again."

Maybe we will, Llano, Merritt thought, but do you want to know something? I really don't much care. I feel too tired and old to care.

Aloud he said, "Whatever you say, Llano."

The horses moved on. The clopping of their hoofs hung an instant in the air, and then was gone like forgotten memories.

They rode into San Miguel from the north. Several mongrels came yapping to greet them, and Lane's sorrel shied once, kicked out, and sent a dog tumbling and squealing. After that the dogs kept their distance.

From open doorways and glassless windows, dark, impassive eyes watched the two tall riders. A hush seemed to gather, so that the clopping of the horses' hoofs on the hard-packed earth of the street rang clarion clear.

There are too many dark trails behind us, Merritt thought, while the skin twitched and crawled on his shoulders. There are ghosts of too many dead men. This is the coming of the end. Don't you feel anything at all, Llano?

In front of the cantina of Elfego Vara they reined in. Llano Lane stepped down and brushed the dust on his arms and thighs. The eyes still watched with that secret stolidity.

Elfego Vara dozed behind his plank bar. The years had not been too good nor too unkind to him. There was a little more fat around his middle, a smattering of gray in his coal-black hair, and a slight sallowness in his complexion.

The tinkling of spurs woke him. He blinked his eyes rapidly to clear them of the mists of sleep, and then watched the two tall men with a puzzled look of semi-recollection.

"Tequila Elfego," Lane said. His voice seemed to boom in the hushed dimness of the cantina.

A wrinkle formed between Elfego's eyes as he poured the drinks. He glanced from one to the other of the tall men, a glimmer of recognition deep in his eyes but never quite coming through.

Lane grinned. His teeth looked very white framed by his black beard. "Nine years ago, Elfego," he said, "we spent many pesos here in your cantina. Look behind the beard. Don't you remember Llano Lane?"

"Llano Lane," Elfego breathed, his eyes widening. There was both fear and awe in his voice.

Merritt threw down the tequila. While it burned his throat and stomach, he looked about, searching the dimness for what might be there but wasn't, this time. Deep in his mind something stirred which he could not define, a fragment of forgotten memory that left him vaguely uneasy.

"We wish a place to stay," Lane was saying. "A good jacal for me and my compadre. You remember the senor Merritt, do you not?"

"And the others?" Elfego Vara asked.

Thoughts of Spencerville crossed Merritt's mind.

"There are no more," Lane said. "One jacal is all we need."

Yes, just one jacal, Elfego, Merritt thought. Dandy Jim Hayes and Johnny Forrest and Flint Quarternight and Ben Lord and Sundance don't need jacals, or anything else any more.

"More tequila, Elfego," Lane said.

This one did not burn quite as much. Merritt searched the dimness of the far corners, the dimness that seemed to have diminished, and now his spirits lifted and he did not care so much any more.

"What are you waiting for?" Lane said.

"Senor Llano, pardon. I grieve to ask, but I have three little mouths to feed. The money."

Lane laughed, quietly but with a ring to it like the ring of blue steel. "Did I leave you unpaid nine years ago? Have I any debts from that time? Is not the word of Llano Lane good with Elfego Vara? Go and find us the jacal. We are tired and wish to sleep. *Andale pronto.*"

Yes, Elfego, *andale,* Merritt thought, and forget about money. I have a gold eagle; Llano has even less. Forget about money. If we'd had better luck in Spencerville—*Andale,* Elfego.

"Of a certainty, Senor Llano," Elfego Vara said. "The jacal. Pronto. You wait here."

His sandals whispered like lost secrets as he padded across the earth floor to the door. His body blocked the light for an instant. Then the sun was bright and clean where it touched the threshold.

LLANO LANE stretched and then sighed. "Man, but it's good to have a roof over your head," he said. "No more sleeping out, in the brush, in the timber. No more of that for a while."

Dave Merritt stood at one of the glassless windows of the jacal, looking out. Somewhere inside him something ancient was whispering, but all he caught was the hiss of sound. He could not make out a single word.

"What's come over you today, Dave?" Lane asked. Gray eyes weighed and pondered. "Relax. We're safe here."

Are we, Llano? Merritt thought, listening to that whisper that would not go. Are we? Aloud he said nothing.

"No one comes here," Lane said. "No one bothers these people. Leave them alone and they'll leave you alone. We had it good that other time, didn't we?"

"We had money that other time," Merritt said.

Lane was silent a moment, struggling with his thoughts. When he spoke it was very softly. "These *pelados* know better than to cross Llano Lane. They might not hear much of the outside world, but they've heard of me."

"We had money that other time," Merritt said again, "and we were worth less. Money gives some cowards courage, if only for a little while."

Lane gave that laugh with the ring of steel. "Why are you so worried? I'm the valuable one of the pair. What did that poster we saw yesterday say? Five thousand for me, but only one thousand for you. The price has gone up since Spencerville." He laughed again.

Spencerville, Merritt thought. It doesn't bother you one little bit, does it, Llano? Do you think we can go on forever? This is the coming of the end, Llano. Don't you ever feel it?

"Sit down, Dave," Lane said. "Relax. Me, I'm going to sleep."

He lay down on the pallet on the floor and closed his eyes, and shortly he was breathing the soft, muted breath of sleep. His hand lay on the handle of his pistol. He never slept any other way.

Merritt felt the ancient stirrings in his mind as he walked through the village. Memory upon memory returned as he passed each hut. Eyes watched from everywhere, but he heard not a single greeting, even though word of him and Lane must have already circulated through San Miguel. The eyes just watched, passively, patiently, neutrally.

These are ghosts of the past, Merritt, he thought, while the skin of his shoulders crawled—the ghosts of many dark trails and many dead men. Did you think it was going to last forever?

He found it at the far end of the village, the house of Agustin Prado. The years had changed it little, except for a few more pit marks in the adobe. Goats were still behind the hut, and the pepper trees still whispered gently in the wind.

He wondered what it was that had led him here. He had memories of a few sweet moments, but they had been only a few of many, and had never really meant anything to him. There was something more, an ancient hunger and yearning. He could not understand a thing like that.

The woman was bending over the hearth. The creak of leather and the jingle of spurs told her he had entered, and she straightened with a small gasp and came around ponderously. It was not until he looked in her eyes and studied the shape of her mouth that Merritt recognized her.

"Margarita," he said.

The years, and child bearing, had made her breasts massive, widened her hips, and added flesh all over her. They had also put a sullen resignation to the burden of life in her face. She eyed him without speaking, frowningly, and he knew that she had not yet seen beneath the brown beard.

"I'm Merritt," he said.

Her face lighted. "Ah, yes, the senor Merritt." Then the sullenness blanketed it again. She went on eyeing him.

Merritt looked about. Gloom hung like thin smoke in the room and in the dimness, standing together, he could make out the varying sizes of four children. They watched him with a somber, open curiosity, watched him and the pistol in the holster at his side.

"Augustin?" Merritt asked. "Your father?"

"Dead."

Something skipped in him. Was it a heartbeat? Or a foreboding?

"And Ana Lucía?" he asked.

"Dead."

This time he knew definitely there had been a pause in his heartbeat. He could not understand, because it had never been like that, for him.

"I'm very sorry," he said, and glanced at the children, his eyes drawn there by something beyond his ken.

"Sorry," said Margarita. Her tone rose, and now the cross that she convinced herself she bore made her voice tremble. "After nine years you return and say you're sorry."

He was frankly puzzled. "I don't understand. Your father, your sister—" He did not know how to finish.

"Yes, my sister. She is dead these many years, but she left something for you to remember her by."

"I really don't understand, Margarita."

"Guadalupe," she said, and the tallest of the children stepped forward to stand beside her. "Look at her, Merritt. Look at her eyes. They are blue, Merritt—the only blue eyes in San Miguel."

THAT night he slept very little. It seemed that every time he dozed he found himself in the hut with Margarita and the children, especially the blue-eyed one who stood there so somberly still, staring up at him, while something old stirred in him.

"I have a good husband," Margarita was saying, a whine in her voice now. "But we have three of our own to feed. Still, she is my sister's flesh and blood. We clothe her and feed her, but it is hard. And now we have another on the way."

His throat was dry and pained him when he spoke. "Ana Lucía— Was it when the child was born? I mean, how did she die?"

"A plague. Guadalupe was not yet one year old. My father died, too."

He stared at the child, who stared back at him. In the gloom he could not make out the look in her eyes. Something strange and new, yet hauntingly familiar, stirred in him, and for an instant a feeling akin to panic gripped him.

"It is so hard," Margarita was saying. "But my Pedro is a good man. We will take her in, he said. She will be as one of our own. But it has been so hard, so little money, so little— It has been very hard."

He took his eyes from the child's face and glanced at her dress. It hung loosely over her body, and it was ragged and torn in two places and none too clean. She's very thin, he thought. Why, she's as thin as— Something chilling and urgent started in him.

"I thought since she is yours—" Margarita was saying. "Anything will help. Even a little. After all, she is yours. Look at her eyes. They're blue as your own. A little would help."

The cold breath of an ancient wind brushed by him. The nearing of the end? he thought. Is that it? Is there really so little time left? Once I wouldn't have cared. But now—"

"Deny her," Margarita was saying, and her tone said that the cross she wore weighed heavily now. "Deny her, then. We will manage. Somehow, no matter how little we have, how poor we are, we will manage."

He did not know what prompted him to do it. His hand reached out, awkwardly, intending to touch the child only lightly on the head. She shrank, eyes widening. Then, quick as a cat, she had ducked under his arm and was past him, with a quick pattering of bare feet. She went out the door and he was standing there, turned half around, hand still outstretched, watching the door that showed him only sunlight and emptiness.

"I've been thinking," Llano Lane said, the next morning. He sat at the table in the jacal, drawing phantom patterns on the table top with a finger. "I can see all the mistakes I made in Spencerville. The next time there won't be any mistakes."

Next time? Merritt thought. Are you crazy,

Llano? We're all through. We're at the nearing of the end. Haven't you felt it yet?

"I guess I got a little cocky," Lane said. "I had a bunch of good boys and everything I tried came off real slick. A train in Kansas, another in Oklahoma. Everything I tried worked without a hitch. I thought because I had some good boys all I had to do was ride

"Grow a little, quick!"

right into Spencerville and then ride right on out."

Merritt stood at the window, watching the leaves of a cottonwood fluttering in the breeze. There was something akin in his own heart, a flutter that seemed to urge hurry, hurry. Hurry for what? he asked himself, and found no answer.

"I thought I would do something that had never been done before," Lane was saying. "Knock off two banks at the same time. We were seven good men, and I figured it could be done. But I was wrong. I made mistakes, but I see them now. Next time there won't be any mistakes."

Is that all you can think of, Llano? Merritt thought. Can't you ever think of anything else? It's so useless to plan anything with the nearing of the end. But, of course, you can't feel that. You never could feel anything.

"We rode in on one bunch," Lane said. "That was the first mistake. We were recognized. They blocked the streets and we had to shoot our way out. Next time it won't be like that." Gray eyes bored into Merritt's back. "Are you listening, Dave?"

"Where will you get five more men?" Merritt asked. "You'll never get another five as good as those."

"I know," Lane said, "and I won't even look. Next time there will be only two. Just you and me, Dave, just you and me."

DOWN in the thickets along the creek Guadalupe sat on a fallen tree in sullen brooding. A worn path led Merritt there. She was so lost in her child's world of grief and resentment that she did not hear him. Only at the last moment did she glance up at him towering over her. He saw her thin body gather, ready to flee. His heart ached in fear of this, and he stopped abruptly. That seemed to reassure her, but she stayed all gathered and tensed, watching him with a dark suspicion.

"I won't hurt you," he said. "I'd never hurt you. I'm—" He could not finish.

She watched him with wide eyes. There was a measure of fear in them but there was more, much more. They reminded him of an old woman's eyes which had seen all there was to see, all that was dark and evil. There was no innocence here.

"Don't be afraid of me," he said. "I'm the last person in the world you should be afraid of."

The eyes took on a glitter like secret laughter. At him? They were an old woman's eyes, all wise. Did she know? Did she know him for what he was?

"Don't run away," he said. "Don't become frightened and run away. I want to talk with you a while. I won't do anything to you. I'm your—your father."

He thought he heard laughter, mocking,

scurrilous laughter. But her face remained grave. Her lips had not moved. The laughter had been borne on the winds of time, the winds of vile memories and shame and reproach.

"Guadalupe," he said, and could find no more words.

Guadalupe, he thought. I wouldn't have named you that. I'd have called you—I don't know what I'd have called you but it would have been something pretty, something very pretty.

"Margarita told me you were bad," he said. "She told me she had to punish you. Margarita said you stole a piece of silver. Don't you know it's wrong to steal?"

He stopped because in the long, haunting corridors of time mocking laughter was shrieking. He became aware that the palms of his hands were wet and that his face was warm. Was it because the old woman's eyes watched him so all-knowingly?

I've got to, he told himself. I'm all she's got to tell her these things. I know I'm the last one who should talk against these things, but I've got to tell her.

"Guadalupe," he said, sweating now while he listened to that laughter shrilling in scornful glee, "it isn't right to take something that belongs to another. Don't you understand that? You wouldn't want any one to take something that belongs to you, would you?"

He stopped. What could she have for any one to take from her? A ragged dress that had probably been given her grudgingly. Certainly nothing else.

There's so little time, he was thinking. This is the nearing of the end. I can feel it breathing colder and harder on my neck hour by hour.

"You should mind Margarita," he said. "She is good to you. She has others but she takes care of you, too, and you should mind her and be grateful for that. Do you understand, Guadalupe?"

The eyes watched him, not frightened any more, but cunning and still suspicious.

I wish you'd smile, he thought. I wish you'd say something. I'd like to touch you, to know how my own flesh feels, but I'm afraid if I reach out my hand you'll run away again.

"Guadalupe," he said, "will you try and remember what I've told you? You should mind me. Won't you tell me that you'll mind me?"

The old, wise eyes glittered, full of wariness. The mouth remained grave and still. He stood and watched, while back in the paths of time reproach and remorse gathered. When he thought the cruel laughter was about to begin again he turned and walked away.

"IT'LL be just the two of us," Llano Lane said. "In Spencerville."

"Spencerville?" Merritt swung around, his mind suddenly full and blazing from that other time. "Are you crazy, Llano?"

Lane laughed that laugh with the ring of steel. "Why not?" Excitement laid a sheen over his eyes. "No one will expect us to try it there again, not after what happened. That's the last place in the world they'd expect us to try."

Merritt started to sweat. Is this it? he thought. Is that where it's going to end? I'd have sworn it was going to be sooner, much sooner.

"Just the two of us," Lane said musingly, his eyes far away, toying with something that still was not clear to him. "And we'll hit both banks at the same time. You just watch, Dave. It'll work this time."

"We'll never make it," Merritt said, his mind sick with the memory of eyes filled with cunning and a knowledge of evil. "How can we? We failed when we were seven. How are we going to do it with only two?"

"We'll fool them," Lane said. "We'll disguise ourselves. That's the only thing I have to figure out, what the disguises are going to be. But I'll get it. Nothing ever stumped Llano Lane for long."

Merritt turned back to the window and watched a barefoot boy leading three goats through the village. He kept seeing those eyes, those old woman's eyes. I wonder what they'd be like if something made her happy, he thought. I wonder what she's like when she smiles.

Lane was silent a while, his gray eyes studying Merritt's back. After a pause, he said, "What's on your mind, Dave?"

Merritt stared into the distance and the past. That frantic urgency breathed on him again. Hurry, hurry, it pleaded.

Lane kept watching him. "Something's eating you," Lane said. "If I didn't know you better, I'd say you were scared. But you never were scared of anything."

I *am* scared, Llano, Merritt thought. For the first time in my life I'm scared. I could tell you, but you wouldn't understand. How can you when I don't quite understand myself?

Later, Merritt returned to the forest. This was Guadalupe's world, a child's world of fancies and dreams and exquisite joys, down here among the thickets that shielded her from watching eyes and set this world apart from that other world that held so little.

She knelt on the ground and built little mounds of sand with her hands. This must have afforded her pleasure, for she was making small, crooning sounds. Merritt stopped a while and listened. It was the first time he had heard her voice.

When he started ahead, his spurs tinkled, and this warned the child. She leaped to her feet and whirled, all in one flash of movement. She stood poised on the balls of her feet ready to flee, so Merritt halted.

"It's only me," he said. "Don't run away. It's only your—"

He was going to say "father," but the word sounded so awkward. Besides he was afraid, if he did say it, that mocking laughter would begin to peal again in the halls of time. The child watched him, eyes wide and wary.

"I brought you something," he said, extending it toward her. "See? It's a doll, a rag doll. I bought it from another little girl."

She hadn't wanted to sell, he thought. She cried and raised a fuss, but when I offered her father the twenty-dollar gold piece he told me I could have the doll. I could have taken it for nothing, because they fear me in San Miguel, but I wanted you to have something that I got honestly. Guadalupe, I wish I never have to give you anything that I stole.

The child's eyes fixed on the doll and stayed there, mesmerized, but she did not move.

"Here," he said, taking a step ahead. "It's yours, your very own. I'm giving it to you, Guadalupe. Here. Take it."

The two small hands that she reached up trembled. Her face said that she did not believe this to be true, that she expected him to snatch the doll away at the last moment. But she reached her hands up anyway.

"Take it," Merritt said. "It's yours alone."

She grabbed the doll and pulled it from his grasp swiftly, as though afraid that he would not let go. She clutched it to her breast and looked up at him with shining eyes, not old woman's eyes but the shining, guileless eyes of a child. Her mouth twitched in a brief, wan smile. Then her face was grave again.

"Guadalupe," he said. "I wish I could—I'm not like other men, Guadalupe. I'm not free to go where I please. I'm no longer free to do as I wish."

The urgency in him cried, hurry! and for an instant he could have wept. The time was so short. He knew it was short. He could feel it in

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the chill crawling of the skin of his shoulders.

If only Llano would forget Spencerville, he thought. That's too risky. Maybe some other place. I've got to talk to him. We could try some other place, and the money I get there I will use to put you in a good home, Guadalupe, where you will have good clothes and good food. I wish I did not have to steal and possibly kill for you, Guadalupe, but there is nothing else I can do. The time is so short. I feel the nearing of the end, Guadalupe.

She stood there, hugging the doll, watching him gravely, and sudden impulse made him stretch out his hand to touch her. She winced as his hand started, and then stood her ground bravely, but he could see the shadow of fear deep in her eyes. Reluctantly, sorrowfully, he withdrew without having touched her.

He rose to his feet. "Be a good girl, Guadalupe," he said woodenly. "Mind Margarita."

He turned and started back toward the village. The winds from out of time were very cold and melancholy now.

LLANO LANE sat at the table in the jacal, cleaning his pistol. He ran the rod through the barrel and the cloth came out clean. Holding the pistol up to the light, he squinted into the barrel. Then he chuckled.

"I've got it, Dave," he said. "It just came to me. You remember that small Amish settlement north of here? Jericho, I think it's called. There's your answer, Dave."

Merritt said nothing. He stood in the doorway, looking out. He felt as cold and detached as the flesh of a dead man, but he was sweating.

"We'll trim out beards the way they trim theirs. We'll steal a couple of outfits from them and ride into Spencerville like that, a couple of Amish preachers." Lane chuckled again. "Who'll ever think it's us? I told you I'd find a way."

Llano, Llano, Merritt was thinking, the time is so short. We might never see Spencerville. We might not even see Jericho. A bullet or a noose are waiting for us, Llano.

Lane had started on the cylinder of his gun, running the rod through the chambers. "No one will give us a second thought," he said. "The Amish don't carry guns. They don't go around robbing banks."

Merritt turned from the door. A sudden spasm set him to trembling, but it was quickly gone. Then all he felt were the cold winds.

Guadalupe, Merritt thought, if I were sure Spencerville would work, if I were sure— But we can't go on forever, and I want to make sure, for you.

Lane held the cylinder up against the light and peered into the chambers. "Well, what do you think of it, Dave?" he asked. "You haven't said."

No, Llano, I haven't said, Merritt thought. I'll never say, because the time for talking is done. I wish I could explain but you'd never understand. All I could tell you is that I've got no choice, no choice at all.

"I'm sorry, Llano," Merritt said, as he drew his pistol and fired.

* * *

The wind sweeping across the land was cold against his shoulders, and he hunched them to shield the child, who was now sleeping in his arms. With sleep the little body had finally relaxed, and now it nestled against him with a softness and warmth that caused him to marvel. This new wonder almost made him forget Llano Lane, slung across the saddle of his sorrel, there behind.

Five thousand dollars, Guadalupe, Merritt thought once. Before I hang I'll see that they get you into a good home, where you will be cared for until you grow up. I wish it could have been different, but with what I am— I hope some day you'll understand.

Ahead, the lights of Fort Benson glistened like jewels in the night. He rode into town by the back way and made directly for the sheriff's office. A lamp glowed inside. Merritt reined in his horse and dismounted very carefully, so as not to awaken the sleeping child.

The sheriff was dozing, but Merritt's steps woke the man and he came to, batting in amazement as they took in the tall man with the sleeping child in his arms. Merritt's pistol rapped hollowly as he tossed it on the desk in front of the sheriff.

"I'm Dave Merritt," he said. "Llano Lane is outside, dead. I killed him. I've come to give myself up and to collect the reward."

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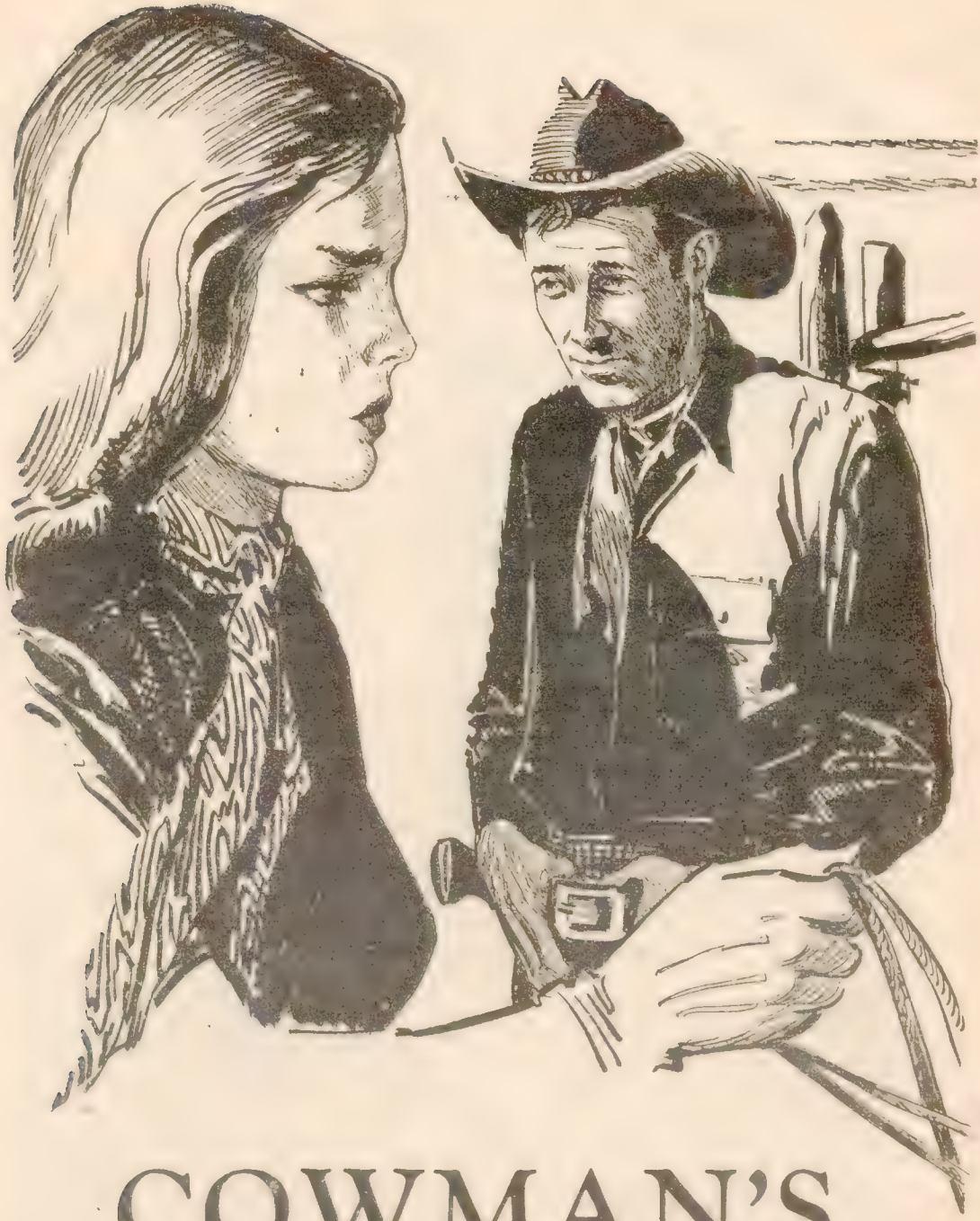

COWMAN'S

TO STOP THE BLOODSHED that threatened the valley, Steve would have to condemn his best friend to death . . . and forsake the girl he loved

LAST night he had slept little, because yesterday he had witnessed a killing. When he came out of the mud-chinked log cabin, long-shanked spurs clanking, his wide mouth drooped at the corners. His high-cheekboned face was grave. His gray eyes bore worry and indecision and self-contempt.

Reflecting upon it, Steve Gorman knew that he had made the wrong move. What he should have done yesterday, he told himself, was to have headed back to Mission Creek and reported to Sheriff Garrett what he had heard and what he had seen.

Instead he had returned here to the cabin and kept out of sight. He had brooded over the killing all night. This morning he had sent Sheriff Garrett word to come down here. Garrett hadn't showed up. Maybe I got panicky, Steve thought.

DAUGHTER

By Ed La Vanway

Clint Rawls, son of the owner of the Rocking R ranch, had killed a young sodbuster over a flighty little nester girl, and Steve Gorman had been sitting his saddle beside Clint when it happened.

The nester, Burlock, was a belligerent, insulting cuss, and needed killing in a fair man-to-man fight. At least he needed a good sound thrashing. So the shooting wouldn't really have mattered except that Burlock had been unarmed, and alone in his wagon. Except for the fact that that killing would lead to more. It would bring to an end the truce which had kept this valley peaceful for the last two years.

Shaded by giant oak trees, Steve Gorman's cabin flanked the road lengthwise, with the timbered mountainside looming over it on the east and a stretch of meadow lying beyond the road to the west. The meadow ended in the bosque of the creek a quarter of a mile away. Steve was gazing north, toward the town.

Because it was rolling land of grass and timber, he couldn't see Mission Creek. But here and there he had a view of the road leading to the town, and it was this he scanned. He saw no solitary horseman. The late-afternoon sun was low enough to slant its rays under the trees in the yard, but there was still no sign of the sheriff.

In the far distance Steve could see a wagon coming his way, and he speculated that it must be the Culligan wagon, homeward bound. It had been by Phil and June Culligan that he had sent word to Sheriff Garrett. The killing of Burlock had made a change in the Culligans, Steve reflected.

Phil had demanded to know what he wanted with the sheriff, and he had asked point-blank if Steve had seen Clint Rawls kill Hal Burlock.

"What makes you think Clint did it?" Steve had countered.

Because Clint Rawls was the only man Burlock had ever had trouble with, Culligan told him. Culligan advised Steve, too, that if he were in possession of information concerning the murder, he'd better turn it over to the proper authorities as fast as he could. That way he might prevent further bloodshed.

The Culligan homestead was three miles down the creek from this cabin, and theirs was the first of the sodbuster layouts. Old Parrish and his mousy young wife had the next place, and below them were about twenty more of the hoemen, strung out along the creek-bottom land in this southeast corner of the valley.

The country to the north, west and south, on the other side of the creek, was still in control of the Rocking R, the Box C, and the Muleshoe ranches. The hundred and sixty acres that the Culligans had filed on was land that had once provided winter hay for the Rocking R horses.

FRANK RAWLS, owner of the Rocking R, could no longer cut and stack the wild hay on the Culligan land or on that occupied by the other hoemen. But this place of Steve Gorman's was still Rawl's—or it would be when Steve proved up on this quarter section and signed it over to Rawls, as he'd agreed to do.

Steve still rode for the Rocking R brand, and had filed on this quarter section for his employer, in order to keep a nester from pre-empting it.

This was as far north as the sodbusters could drag their plows.

When he'd located here, Steve had resolved to have no truck with the hoemen or their lusty womenfolk. But the Culligans had kept after him until they'd forced him to be neighborly.

They'd done it to further their own interests, Steve suspected. Their friendliness had been an effort to sway him to the sod-buster way of looking at the land. Well, in that they had failed.

Grangers were necessary; yet they were a land-hungry lot, and kept reaching out for country not right for farming. Mission Creek Valley would support a few nesters in this corner of it.

But most of it, except for the narrow bottoms of the smaller streams, was fit only for grazing.

It stood to reason, then, that if only cowmen could occupy most of the valley, they should be permitted to hold the bottom hay

land for their own use. But there was no reasoning with the plow pushers.

THE thud of hoofbeats and the cracking of windfall twigs under iron shoes sounded in back of the cabin, and Steve Gorman became alert. It was Sheriff Garrett, he thought.

The lawman had come by way of a short-cut trail through the foothills.

Rounding the fireplace end of the cabin with spurs clanking, Steve saw two riders, not one, coming along the fence of the small corral. It was Frank Rawls and Cheryl, father and sister of the man who'd killed the nester.

"Draw a fresh bucket of water, Steve," the rancher said. "This gal wants a drink."

Frank and his daughter reined toward the horse trough beyond the well, which was brimming full, and Steve turned to the washbench near the kitchen door, getting the bucket and dipper.

The elder Rawls was a thickset muscular man of short stature, and gray at the temples. His face was broad, with a down-curled wisp of mustache on either side of his mouth. His eyebrows were thick, and he wore a high-peaked black hat and a rusty suit of store clothes. The legs of his trousers were tucked into high-heeled boots. His unbuttoned coat revealed a cartridge belt and the drape of it suggested a holstered sixgun.

Father and daughter both were armed with Winchesters, and Frank had instructed the girl in the use of hers until now she was handier with a saddle gun than he was. He'd embarrassed the girl several times when Steve was along, because he was proud of her skill and had insisted she exhibit her marksmanship in front of rank strangers.

Swinging down and slipping the bit out of his sorrel's mouth, the elder Rawls kept his dark eyes on Steve Gorman steadily while Steve drew a bucket of water and dipped Cheryl a drink.

Wearing spurred boots and a range hat, a divided riding skirt and a flannel shirt, Cheryl was a slender, dark-haired person with a lovely face that was now set in sober lines. Her long-lashed eyes were fixed on Steve, too, and he saw then that her loyalty to Clint was greater than her love for Steve. She would thrown Steve Gorman to the wolves, if necessary, in order to save her reckless brother.

She lifted a shapely leg over the cantle of her saddle, and dismounted to take the dipper.

Steve reached for the reins of her horse, to water the animal.

Looking from father to daughter, he asked, "Had dinner?"

It was their cabin and their supplies, but living here and doing the cooking placed Steve in the position of host.

Cheryl said, "We've had dinner, but it's almost supertime now." Her tone was hurried and unfriendly.

Her father glanced at her. "Are you hungry again?"

Cheryl finished drinking and dashed the remainder of the water out of the dipper. "No. He asked if we'd had dinner and I said it was almost suppertime. I didn't say I was hungry."

"I've got a pot of beans simmering in the coals," Steve said. "It'll only take a minute to rustle up a bite."

Frank Rawls put the bridle back on, ground-hitched his sorrel, and turned to his daughter. "Want Steve to fix you some supper?"

"No," Cheryl said, and gave her father a smoldering look.

She dropped the dipper into the bucket on the well curb then, and moved off under the trees as though looking the place over. She was, Steve knew, forcing Frank's hand.

Rawls stood a moment with averted eyes. Then, brushing his drooping mustache, he turned a sharp, steady gaze on his young rider and said, "Steve, when we talked over this homesteading deal, you told me you aimed to watch your step and not get tangled up with any of those nester gals."

Steve Gorman's gray eyes hardened. "What do you mean, Frank?"

"I mean there's hell to pay now. Clint told me all about it—about the fuss you had with Burlock, and his trying to cut you in two with that scattergun. Now, I'm not blaming you for drilling him through the brisket. You had to, I reckon, to protect yourself. And I'm

standing behind you. But what I don't like about it, Steve, is—"

"Hold on, Frank."

The rancher fell silent.

"If Clint told you I shot Burlock, he's a liar. He did it himself. And all Burlock had in his hands at the time was a pair of checklines."

Frank Rawls kept gazing at him.

"Clint's the one who got tangled up. The way I understood it, he took one of the nester girls out and kept her out all night. And I heard Burlock tell him if he so much as spoke to the girl again, he'd kill him. Then before I realized what Clint intended to do, he'd pulled his gun and shot Burlock twice in the chest. The team ran away and piled Burlock's wagon up against a tree. They broke loose from it and kept running. Clint and I came on down the road without going near it."

"Did Burlock shoot at Clint?"

Steve shook his head. "How could he, with no gun?"

"He had a gun. They found a double-barreled shotgun near the wrecked wagon, and one shell had been fired."

"I don't know anything about it, Frank. I'm just telling you what actually happened, what I saw and heard."

FOR a time Frank Rawls kept his gaze lowered in thought, thumbs hooked in his cartridge belt. He turned to the bucket for a drink, then faced Steve Gorman again.

"Clint and I saw Sheriff Garrett about it, and he told me to bring you in for a talk. What you'd better do first is come over to the ranch in the morning so you and I and Clint can get together on something to tell Garrett." He studied Steve. "You and Clint had better stick together on this."

Steve said, "You think I'm the one that's lying?"

"It doesn't make any difference. Either way, those nesters are going to give us hell. That fellow Culligan is talking fight all over town, and I understand he bought a whole case of twelve gauge shells loaded with buckshot."

Steve said, "He's a fool."

"He and some of the other hoemen cornered Sheriff Garrett and told him what was what. They said they were either going to see the man who killed Hal Burlock stand trial for murder, or they would keep Mission Creek surrounded day and night with dry-gulchers, and down every cowman who tried to enter town."

"If they want Clint to stand trial for murder," Steve said, "how do they explain the shotgun with the fired shell? You can't murder a man who's shooting at you."

"They claim it wasn't Burlock's gun. They said his was still at home on the pegs over the fireplace."

"Clint must have planted the gun there," Steve mused. "If he did, he sure made a fast ride."

The rancher said, "Either he or you."

"Yes, either he or I."

Frank Rawls sighed. "You and Clint are both boneheads. Why didn't you come back to the ranch with him? It doesn't matter which one of you did it. Let Clint take the blame if you want to, but back him up. Swear that he had to shoot Burlock in self-defense."

"Frank, that was the cold-blooded murder of an unarmed man. What would you do if you were me?"

Frank Rawls was silent, and Steve was aware of birds chirping in the corral behind him, and of a jay chattering raucously somewhere up the mountainside.

"That's the way you aim to tell it?"

Steve nodded. "I've got to tell it the way it was, Frank. If I don't, if Clint doesn't stand trial, a lot of other people are going to die. Women and kids, too, probably, if worst comes to worst and you and Bruce Classen and Lew Niles throw your outfits together for a raid on the nesters."

"That's what Bruce and Lew want to do."

The rancher tugged at his mustache. "Sheriff Garrett bends over backward for those sodbusters. He'll try his best to hang either you or Clint for this—maybe both of you."

"Then Clint ought to plead guilty. He'd get sent to prison that way, and in a few years, when things change, maybe you could get him out."

"Why don't you plead guilty? And I'll do the same about you."

"I don't owe Clint that much, Frank. Or you, either. I sure don't intend to serve a term in the penitentiary for something Clint did."

Frank Rawls looked away. "I lost my hold on the law around here when Garrett defeated my man for sheriff. That's why I've laid low these last two years. If I'd had a man in that office halfway loyal to us cowmen, I'd have chousted every last one of these plow pushers back over the mountain."

Steve nodded.

The rancher stood silent a moment, then looked around for his daughter. "Ready, Cheryl?"

"Yes," she said, and came toward the horses ground-tied in the yard, searching the faces of both men.

Cheryl was hungry, but she would make the long ride back to Rocking R headquarters rather than eat food Steve had prepared; and whatever had been between him and her in the way of affection had gone by the board now, he knew. She was at this moment his bitterest enemy, and she intended to stick by her brother to the end.

She and her father swung astride their horses. Frank Rawls reined his mount around so that he could see both his daughter and Steve Gorman, who stood with his hips against the well curb.

"Cheryl, Steve tells it different from what Clint said. Steve claims Clint killed Burlock. He says Clint took Burlock's intended wife out and kept her out all night. That's what the trouble was about."

"I said one of the nester girls, Frank."

"Well, it was Burlock's intended wife."

Cheryl looked from one to the other. "You didn't think Steve would confess it, did you, father? I didn't. I knew what he would say —that he would accuse Clint of it."

Frank Rawls made no reply. Moving his gaze back to Steve, he said, "I'll be looking for you in the morning."

"Have Clint there."

"I will. Don't worry about that."

Steve met Cheryl's gaze again as she and her father rode off. Her face was pained, her eyes filled with hostility.

Steve swung his arm down, reaching for his sixgun

STEVE GORMAN stood under the oaks in the front yard until the clattering wagon drew near enough for him to recognize the couple on the spring seat. Sure that it was the Culligans, and not old Parrish or one of the other hoemen, he turned into the cabin. He wanted to give Phil and June a chance to drive by without having to speak, if they so desired.

When the wagon was directly in front of the cabin, Phil Culligan pulled the team of roans to a stop, however. Steve came out to the road. Dressed in denim overalls and blue cotton shirt, Culligan was a lank, bony man with a long-jawed florid face and a shock of sandy hair that was covered by a battered felt hat.

"I've seen Sheriff Garrett," he said, "and he told me he didn't think you could skip the country. He said when he got ready for you he'd come and get you."

Steve said irritably, "I heard from him," and swung his gaze to the girl. He touched his hatbrim.

Mrs. Culligan was blue-eyed and buxom, and the fit of her blue-checked gingham dress hinted at the plump roundness of her breasts. Her sunbonnet was lying in her lap and her yellow hair was worn braided and pinned around her head in a coronet.

She said, "Steve, the way you're keeping out of sight, people will think that you had something to do with killing Hal. Phil and I know you didn't, but it looks bad. Why don't you saddle up and ride into town and tell Sheriff Garrett what you know?"

"I'll tell what I know in court, June."

The girl's husband laughed without mirth. "Steve's afraid to. He knows what Frank Rawls will do to him if he opens his mouth against Clint."

Steve Gorman's face showed anger. "I asked you this morning to send the sheriff down here, but all you did was bring back a sarcastic threat. I didn't have to say anything, to begin with. If I'd kept quiet, you'd never have known I knew anything at all about that killing."

Mrs. Culligan said, "Why sure, Phil. He intends to do the right thing."

Culligan was silent, his long-jawed face hard. Changing his grip on the roans' lines, he said, "We know that Clint killed Hal, even without anybody's testifying to it. And if I can get a few more of them seeing it my way, we'll catch Mr. Clint Rawls and string him up higher than a kite."

"I heard that you've been ranting around town for Sheriff Garrett to bring Burlock's killer to justice. You don't want justice," Steve said. "Not in a court of law. You just want an excuse to kill a man with a rope."

Mrs. Culligan said, "Hal and Phil were close friends, Steve. You can't blame Phil for feeling strongly about it."

Steve moved around to cast a glance into the bed of the wagon. He saw the case of shotgun shells that Frank Rawls had mentioned. He looked up at the man.

"Frank Rawls told me you've been egging the grangers on, wanting them to make war on the cattlemen. I hope you know what you're doing. The first gun the cowmen shoot will be aimed at you. Did you know that? They always try to tally the man who puts himself up as ringleader."

"Don't you worry about Phil Culligan."

"I'm not worrying about Phil Culligan at all. I'm thinking of the women and kids on down below you."

Culligan tightened the lines. Brows lifted, he said, "We'll take care of our women and kids." Then he sent the roans on down the road..

Steve Gorman kept watching, and when the wagon had pulled off a little way, June lifted her hand behind her husband's head and waved. She didn't look around, she just waved. Steve figured she had made the gesture to let him know she realized he had been talking sense to her husband. She could do nothing with Phil, though.

The sun sank below the horizon. The shadow of the mountain came across the meadow and over the cabin, and all up and down the road there was a flurry of activity, as birds settled down to take baths. The smell of new-lifted dust permeated the evening air.

Steve Gorman ate his supper, washed the dishes, and afterward raked the coals in the fireplace around so that they would grow cold. Although he brought in an armload of wood, he wouldn't need a fire in the morning. He intended to eat breakfast at the Rocking R headquarters.

His two saddle horses, a bay and a sorrel, were grazing down near the bosque. Getting a rope from the barn when twilight deepened, he walked down toward the creek, caught the horses, and brought them up to the corral, riding one bareback with no bridle or halter and leading the other.

Coming back to the cabin when his mounts were taken care of, he stood near the wash-bench and gazed down the valley at the lamplight flickering in the windows of the nester homes. Tomorrow night some of those windows might be darkened, he thought.

No, there was no other way of keeping peace in this hair-triggered valley, he told himself glumly. To keep down trouble and bloodshed for everyone else, he would have to be a witness against the son of the man he worked for, against the brother of the girl he loved.

Again the night seemed interminable, and Steve slept only fitfully. Mostly he lay and listened to owls screeching and bobcats squall-

ing on the high ledges back of the cabin. He tried to plan his future.

When he took the stand against Clint Rawls, he would be finished here. He could no longer ride for Rocking R, and he could no longer dream of a future which included Cheryl, either. At three o'clock, he got up.

Shaving and washing, he put on a fresh shirt and clean levis. Buckling on his Colt and picking up his carbine, he went out and saddled the deep-chested bay he had corraled last night. He turned the sorrel out. Mounting, he rode toward the creek, forded it, and angled toward the opposite side of the valley, riding in starlit darkness.

WITH daybreak, only one more ridge lay between him and Rocking R headquarters, and he could see the top poles over the corral gates. A moment later he rode down upon a spread of corrals and buildings which lay among tall cottonwoods along a tributary stream of Mission Creek.

He found the ranch already astir, with sparks lifting from the cookshack chimney and the smell of coffee and meat and sourdough biscuits informing him that breakfast was almost ready.

The low, rambling ranch house was on a knoll apart from the scattering of dirt-roofed log sheds and outbuildings. Two horses stood with trailing reins and sagging girths near the front veranda. Without riding around that way for a closer look, Steve couldn't tell whether they were Rocking R mounts. He thought not. It was unlikely that any Rocking R horses would be in front of the main house at this early hour. At the back, maybe, but not at the front veranda. Frank Rawls must have visitors.

The big corral where the long log stable stood was full of horses, and Steve knew that the wrangler had already brought up the saddle band. Riding toward that corral, he noticed most of the outfit standing around the front of the bunkhouse. A couple of the riders threw up their hands in friendly waves. Steve responded.

Intending to rope a mount out of the remuda when he got ready to ride again, he unsaddled the bay near the gate and slung his saddle over the top bar of the fence. By the time he had done this, he heard jingling spurs, and looked around to see Clint Rawls approaching.

Clint was slim, sharp of face and dark of complexion. His upper lip bore a dark line of mustache. The gun he'd used on Burlock, a pearl-handled Colt, was belted around him, and he wore his broad-brimmed white hat cocked low on a dark eye.

He gave Steve Gorman a challenging, half-threatening and half fearful look. "Steve," he said, "I rockon you're sore at me, but I can't help it. If I hadn't told the old man what I did, he'd have let Garrett run me in. And you know what that would have meant. Those damned sodbusters would have peeled that hoosegow off me and strung me up."

Steve nodded. "What are you going to tell him this morning—that I'm a liar?"

Clint's face twisted. "I'll have to own up to it, I reckon." Anger flared bitterly in his eyes, and he added, "But you aren't going to turn me over to the sheriff. Don't get that idea. I wouldn't mind standing trial, but I wouldn't get a trial. And I don't aim to be locked up and have a mob of sodbusters snarling around me like a pack of wolves."

There was an odd light far back in Clint's eyes, and Steve thought, he's just talking. He's already figured out what he really aims to do.

"Why on earth did you shoot Burlock? You don't care anything about that girl."

"I saw him start to reach for that shotgun."

"Ah, hell, Clint. You and I both know he didn't have a gun in that wagon."

Clint nodded. "But you're wrong about the girl. I do care for her. And she's filled me so full of Hal Burlock's good points these last few months that I was sick of him. I didn't kill Burlock on account of what he did, or threatened to do. I killed him so she wouldn't have anything to brag about but a corpse."

Steve was silent. "Who's that in the house?" he asked then.

"Bruce and Lew."

Bruce Classen, owner of the Box C, and Lew Niles, of Muleshoe—Frank must have sent for them, Steve thought. He must be planning a raid on the nester settlement.

But surely not. Frank Rawls had more sense

than that. A man who had the sheriff's office and the courts in his vest pocket might get away with something like that, but under the present circumstances it was dangerous for a cowman even to take pot shots at the nester's chickens.

"They wouldn't have a thing on me if it weren't for you," Clint said surlily. "If you would back me up, say that I had to shoot Burlock in self-defense, everything would work out all right. The old man could grease a few palms here and there, and the whole thing would die down."

"If you don't stand trial, Clint, those sodbusters will take to the warpath. Then there's no telling how many on both sides will get killed."

"Maybe so. But they wouldn't if that damned Culligan would keep his mouth shut."

"If it weren't for me and Culligan," Steve said, "you'd be sitting pretty, wouldn't you?"

Clint said, "You're a hell of a friend, letting me down now when I'm in trouble."

"A man loses my friendship, Clint, when he shoots down a man who's not packing a gun."

The clangor of the triangle sounded, and Steve Gorman turned his gaze on the men heading for the cookshack. "I haven't had breakfast, Clint. I'm going to eat."

Clint walked with him. "After you eat," he said, "come up to the house. The old man wants to see you."

"Don't I know it? What do you think I rode all the way over here for?"

THE Rocking R office and parlor was one big log-beamed room. There was a fireplace, comfortable chairs and couches, and the floor was strewn with rugs made of the pelts of animals.

Steve found Frank Rawls seated at the rolltop desk, with his back to it. Clint was propped against the end of a couch. Classen was seated on this side of him. Niles stood near the far wall, chewing on a cigar.

Bruce Classen was a burly, bull-necked giant of a man with a narrow mouth and piggy eyes. Lew Niles was a pug-nosed fellow with a barrel body and short, thick legs. Like the two Rawlses, this pair had their gazes trained on Steve Gorman.

Tugging at this mustache, the elder Rawls said, "Sit down, Steve."

Bruce Classen made a gesture of impatience. "Hell, Frank," he said, "let's not waste any more time. Let's get on our horses and go. What Gorman says won't make any difference, as far as I can see."

Steve kept standing. "Make any difference about what?" he asked.

Frank Rawls got to his feet. He swiveled the chair back around and said, "We're going to make a ride across the valley and have a talk with that neighbor of yours, Steve."

"Culligan?"

Rawls nodded.

"You can't do anything with him. He's too hotheaded."

Rawls cut a glance at his son. "Clint still swears that Burlock tried to tally him with that shotgun, Steve, and we're going over to see if maybe Culligan and the other sodbusters aren't trying to frame Clint. If we put enough pressure on Culligan, he might admit that the gun did belong to Burlock."

"You can't buy him off, Frank, if that's what you mean."

"Well, it won't hurt to try."

Clint said, "The gun *was* his, wasn't it, Steve?" and bored Steve Gorman with eyes that were sharp as gimlets.

Steve saw the whole play now, or thought he did. He could tell it by the tension that gripped these men. The four of them—Clint and his father and Classen and Niles—were planning to take Steve off to one of the lonely mountain canyons and kill him.

Dead, he could no longer be an eyewitness against Clint, if and when Clint came to trial. With Steve Gorman dead, the elder Rawls could hire other witnesses to commit perjury—swear to a false alibi for Clint. They could tell the jury that Clint was with them, playing cards maybe, at some spot far removed from the scene of the killing.

Steve said flatly, "Clint, don't try to pin me down about that shotgun. I didn't see it. I don't know a thing about it."

Frank Rawls cut a look at the door leading to other parts of the ranch house, then spoke in a tone too low to carry back to his womenfolk. "As I recollect it, Steve, you told me the killing of Burlock was the cold-blood-

ed murder of an unarmed man. If so, how can you say you don't know anything about the shotgun? You can't claim he was unarmed unless you can also say definitely that the scattergun wasn't in the wagon."

"Well, you figure it out, Frank. I can't."

"It's no little thing, Steve, not by a damned sight. That gun is going to be mighty important at the trial."

Pug-nosed Lew Niles moved around to look at Clint. Taking the cigar from his mouth, he grinned sourly. "If there is a trial," he said. "The mood those plow pushers are in now, I doubt if there'll be one."

Clint said, "It would be just like you, Lew, to let them string me up."

Niles and Classen had almost as large a stake in this as Clint had, however, and they realized it as well as young Rawls did. Once the nesters got the cattlemen on the run, Niles's Muleshoe and Classen's Box C ranches, at least the bottom land, would be covered with sodbusters as thick as blackbirds in a corral.

Bruce Classen said, "Well, Frank, are you going or not?"

Lew Niles said, "Hell, yes, Frank. Let's ride over and palaver. Then we can tell what those hoemen aim to do."

Rawls nodded. He turned a level gaze on his son and said, "You stay here. Don't you go anywhere till we get this thing settled."

"All right, I'll stay. But if Sheriff Garrett comes nosing around, it'll go bad with him. I'll use my Winchester on him."

"If you do, damn you, I'll use a pair of chaps on your backside. If Garrett comes for you, you go with him."

"To jail?" Clint asked, his dark eyes round.

The elder Rawls nodded. "And sit tight. Bruce and Lew and I will straighten it all out."

Frank Rawls jerked his head then and led the way out onto the veranda. Classen and Niles turned to the ground-hitched horses and began tightening their cinches. Steve accompanied the Rocking R owner toward the main corral, telling himself wryly that the older men didn't trust Clint. The three of them were going to keep their dirty work among themselves.

Fewer horses stood about the corral now. for the outfit had already roped out mounts and ridden off to work. Only the wrangler was in sight, at the woodpile behind the cookshack, using the ax. Then Steve saw Cheryl.

She came from behind one of the sheds, leading a saddled pony, and they met her at the corral gate.

Her father said bluntly, "Don't think you're going with us, young lady," and continued on to the harness room to get his catch rope.

CHERYL stared after him, frowning; then turned her gaze on Steve, who'd stopped near the gate to take the rope off the saddle which rested atop the fence.

"Do you know where they're going?"

"Across the valley to talk with Phil Culligan about the shotgun, they say."

"All of you?"

Steve nodded.

He watched the girl fight an inner battle, trying to humble her independent, defiant spirit. "Steve," she said then, earnestly, "you could clear Clint if you would. Father says you could."

"Frank'll get him out of it. He's gotten him out of all his scrapes so far."

Cheryl kept watching him.

"When it's all over, I may be buzzard bait, but Clint will be clear. Don't worry about him."

He watched a shocked expression cross Cheryl's face. The stoniness returned, and she said, "My father wouldn't harm you, Steve Gorman, no matter what you did, or threatened to do."

"Your father might not, but under the circumstances I don't think he would protest much if Niles or Classen thought it best to put a bullet in me."

Cheryl gave her chin an upward jerk, lips compressed. "What do you want—sympathy?" she asked scornfully. "Are you scared? Are your principles so damn big you have to die for them?"

Face wry, he said, "Do you think that's silly or something?" and turned away to catch and saddle a mount.

Cheryl was still standing motionless beside her pony when Steve and her father swung into their saddles to join Classen and Niles near the ranch house.

Frank Rawls took the lead and headed up the trail toward the town of Mission Creek. Pulling his hatbrim down against the early sun, Steve told himself, with relief, that he had figured wrong concerning the intentions of these men.

Frank would have reined west among the corrals to take a trail into the mountains back of the Rocking R headquarters, had they been planning to shoot Steve Gorman down. Maybe they really were headed for the Culligan homestead. Steve was sure of this when Frank left the main road.

They angled toward the lower valley then, following along the beds of arroyos and working their way through stands of timber. Frank kept down off the ridges, however, Steve noticed. But he would have done this anyway, because neither he nor the other two cowmen trusted the plow pushers. Considering the Burlock killing, one of the hothead nesters might take a shot at a cowman he saw skylined.

Talking little, the cavalcade crossed the valley, climbed into the foothills, and circled toward the lower valley, passing above Steve's cabin.

Frank said, "It would be just our luck for Culligan to be gone off somewhere."

Classen said, "Maybe not."

They were on the thickly timbered hillside directly behind the Culligan homestead now, and Frank Rawls drew rein squarely back of the house.

Suspicious and angered, Steve passed a look over each of the others, then planted his hands on the saddlehorn and stared down through the trees. He could see the back of Culligan's outbuildings and house. A milk cow stood in the barnlot and a flock of chickens moved about, pecking at grass and insects. Neither Phil nor his wife were in sight. Rawls and Classen and Niles dismounted.

Piggy eyes glinting, Classen said, "Climb out of that saddle, Gorman."

Steve dismounted. He dropped his bridle reins. With his hand near his gunbutt, he tried to move back so that he could keep all three men under surveillance. He couldn't make it. Lew Miles stepped around him and backed away, and Steve had Niles on one side and Classen on the other.

Throat dry, Steve said, "Frank, you're not intending to bushwhack Culligan, are you?"

"No, Steve, I'm not. You are. You're going to take your saddle gun and, when Culligan comes out, you're going to drop him."

"I don't think he's at home."

"His team's there."

Classen said, "Then you and Clint will be even, Steve. And if you don't tell the jury that Clint had to shoot Burlock in self-defense, we'll get up and swear that we saw you bushwhack Phil Culligan."

Steve shook his head. "No, I won't do that."

An exclamation from Niles pulled their gazes away now, and Steve saw that Phil Culligan had just stepped out of his kitchen door. The sound of a rifle sliding from its saddle boot caught Steve's attention, and he glanced around. It was his own gun. Bruce Classen had taken it.

WEARILY Frank Rawls said, "It'll settle the whole thing, Steve. That fellow down there is causing most of the trouble with his loud mouth. Tally him, and there won't be a scrap. Bruce and Lew and I swing enough weight to keep Sheriff Garrett's hands tied, unless the nesters are organized behind him. And with Culligan out of the picture, the rest of the hoemen will scatter like quail."

Lew Niles muttered, "Better be doing something. He's fixing to go back inside."

Steve shook his head. "No, I won't shoot him."

The same stoniness that Steve had often seen in Cheryl's features moved into Frank's broad face. At this moment Bruce Classen whirled around. He feinted as though to smash Steve in the face with the barrel of the Winchester. Steve threw up an arm and dodged. He swung the arm down, reaching for his sixgun, but at that instant Lew Niles sprang forward and struck him behind the ear. Dazed, Steve dropped his half-drawn weapon, staggered, and went down.

Bruce Classen jacked a cartridge into the chamber of the rifle. He slapped the butt of the gun to his shoulder. He took long aim. The gun roared. A few seconds of silence followed, and then a scream sounded down below. Steve recognized June Culligan's voice.

Frank Rawls said, "Reckon you hit him dead center, Bruce?"

"I got him through the head. That's point-blank range for me, Frank."

Lew Niles moved his gaze to watch June Culligan, whose sobs were plainly audible, and Steve braced himself for a try at the gun he'd dropped.

Even as he mustered strength for the effort, Bruce Classen looked around at him and said, "Lew, what are you waiting for?"

"Herbie! You've seen too many Western movies!"

Niles said, "Nothing," and leveled his gun. When lead and flame and smoke erupted from it, Steve Gorman knew no more.

When he regained consciousness, he felt a hand on his jaw. The hand pushed gently, moving his head. He opened his eyes. June Culligan was bending over him, and her face was that of a woman who'd cried herself out.

Steve moistened his lips. "What about Phil?"

She shook her head.

"Dead?"

June Culligan nodded.

Steve tried to move, to sit up. Pain knifed him in the side, and he kept lying. He breathed deeply for a moment.

"It missed my lung," he said.

The girl nodded agreement.

His whole side was wet with blood. He took a pinch of his clothing and pulled it away from his body, so that the blood, in drying, wouldn't plaster his shirt to the wound. There was a hole in his back, too, he realized, for he could feel blood under him.

"Did Clint Rawls do this?" June asked. "Did he shoot Phil?" Her voice was bitter.

"Clint wasn't here."

"Then it was Frank."

"No, it wasn't Frank. Bruce Classen shot Phil."

"And you, too?"

"It doesn't matter about me."

He lifted a hand, pushed the girl away, and fought to his knees. He rested there until the nausea passed, and then got to his feet.

"If you'll help me on my horse . . ." he said. Then he pitched forward on his face, unconscious again.

When he'd fought off the blackness a second time, he found himself between crisp white sheets on a bed. There were several pople in the room, he realized, and the lamp on th dresser was burning.

He passed his gaze over the whisker-stubbled faces of a couple of nesters from farther down Mission Creek; then his eyes settled on the man seated with crossed legs at the bedside. He recognized the steerhorn-mustached visage of the sheriff.

"Garrett," he said, "roll me a cigarette."

The lawman became alert. "About time you were waking up, young fellow."

He reached for the sack of tobacco in his vest. With the cigarette rolled, he got up to hold the end of it over the top of the lamp-globe. When he had the smoke going, he brought it to the man on the bed.

Drawing on it deeply, Steve heard womenfolk talking in other parts of the house, and realized that June Culligan had somehow gotten him down the hill to her home. Old Parrish had heard the gunshots, probably, and had come to investigate.

Garrett said, "Who killed him?"

"Culligan? Bruce Classen."

"Did you see him?"

"I was standing right beside him. No, I wasn't, either. I was on the ground."

"Did he shoot you, too?"

"Never mind about me."

Sheriff Garrett's gaunt face hardened. "Young fellow, before we go any further, let me give you some advice. Always let the law handle your troubles. Then you'll have nothing to worry about or be sorry for."

"You misunderstood me, Sheriff. I'm responsible for this bullet hole I got. If I'd done the right thing to begin with, I wouldn't have had it. So I'm forgetting it."

"You mean, helping me build a case against young Rawls for killing Hal Burlock?"

STEVE was silent. Garrett wouldn't arrest Clint, he knew, until he had positive information concerning the shotgun. It wasn't up to Clint to prove that he did shoot Burlock in self-defense; it was the law's chore to show that he did not shoot the man to protect himself, that it was murder. And the shotgun being found near the body with a fired hull in it was strong evidence in Clint's favor, no matter how it got there and regardless of who owned the weapon. Burlock could have been carrying his own or anybody else's gun in the wagon.

Steve said to the sheriff, "Clint told you I did that, didn't he?"

"Yes, something like that." The lawman leaned forward to brush from the bedsheet a speck of fire that Steve had spilled from the end of his cigarette. Straightening in his chair, he said, "I know that Clint shot him twice in the chest. But what I don't know is whether Burlock had the scattergun on him."

Steve handed him the smoked cigarette and he dropped it into a saucer on the table near the head of the bed.

"Did he?"

"Have the gun on him?"

Steve considered it, frowning, and a sound at the inner doorway caught his attention. He saw a girl appear there. It was Cheryl Rawls.

Sheriff Garrett noticed her, too. He got to his feet and took off his hat. "Come in, ma'am," he said, and pulled the chair back so that she could approach the bedside.

"How is he?" Cheryl asked.

Steve himself said, "He's just plumb all right, ma'am."

"That's sarcastic," Cheryl said. "You don't look all right. You're almost as pale as that sheet." She glanced questioningly at the sheriff.

Nodding, Garrett said, "He's all right, Miss Cheryl. He's doing fine."

June Culligan came to the doorway to look in, and the lawman turned to her. "Mrs. Culligan, it seems you've got plenty of help here. I'll take another look at Phil, if you'll let me, and then be getting on my way. I've got a lot of riding to do yet tonight."

June said, "Yes, we'll have plenty of company, Sheriff Garrett," and turned back.

Glancing at Steve again, Garrett left the bedroom. The two denim-clad nesters got up to follow him, and Steve wondered if Garrett had deputized them.

Alone now with Cheryl, he said, "The sheriff's going after Bruce Classen for killing Culligan."

An expression of relief flooded Cheryl's face. She'd been afraid that Steve was sending the lawman for her brother. Learning that Steve hadn't she became an entirely different person. She moved forward to lay a hand on Steve's brow, to see how much fever he had, and the look on her face, her gratitude, was something almost pathetic.

It made Steve Gorman do some sober thinking. He was alone in the world. Anything that happened to him would affect no one but himself. And he'd lived a selfish life. Down his backtrail, he couldn't find a single instance where he'd sacrificed his own well-being in order to lighten a burden for someone else. Now was his chance, he told himself, to better his record.

He loved this girl. Tears and heartache were in store for her unless Steve shielded her from it. Well, he could do it and he would, he told himself. He would have a talk with Clint and exact a promise that Clint would keep out of trouble from now on. And having come so close to prison bars this time, and maybe even the hangrope, Clint would probably be glad for the chance to mend his ways.

"Cheryl," Steve said, "don't worry about Clint. He didn't shoot Hal Burlock. I did."

Cheryl stared at him, lips parted, and then

she swallowed. It was the last thing in the world she'd expected to hear from Steve Gorman, and it left her speechless.

June Culligan had overheard Steve, too, and she came in and stood by the bedside, staring down at him queerly, as though she considered him a fool. Not for a minute did she believe what he'd said, but she knew why he'd said it. He was trying to make Cheryl stop worrying herself to death over her no-good brother.

"Cheryl," June said, "if you're going to stay, I'll tell everyone but Mr. and Mrs. Parrish they can go home. They all have so much to do. Mr. and Mrs. Parrish will sit with Phil, and you and I can take turns with Steve."

"Nobody needs to sit up with me," Steve said.

The two girls looked at him without saying anything.

Cheryl said, "I'll stay as long as you need me, June."

Mrs. Culligan left the room.

Steve closed his eyes and must have dropped off to sleep, for when he opened them again Cheryl, too, had gone and the lamp had been shaded so that only dim light shone. Later in the night June entered the room softly to put the windows down. When she turned from the window across from the foot of Steve's bed, she found him watching her.

"Are you warm enough?" she asked.

"Yes, but I'm thirsty. Can I have a drink?"

She brought him a glass of water.

He slept some more afterward. When he awakened, faint daylight showed outside the window. Lying on his back and looking across the foot of his bed, he could see the timbered mountainside which lifted back of the Culligan outbuildings. He thought he could see the very trees under which he and the three cowmen had dismounted yesterday.

Sheriff Garrett would arrest Bruce Classen, because there was no doubt whatever about the manner in which Phil Culligan had been shot down. No shotgun with an empty hull had been planted near the body of Culligan to make it look like self-defense. And Garrett and the two men with him had heard Steve say that Classen was guilty.

FOLLOWING this line of thought, Steve Gorman suddenly jerked his eyelids apart. He'd seen movement at the window. Someone on the outside had glanced in, or Steve thought so. He kept watching.

He saw nothing. He heard nothing, either, outside the house or in, and he told himself that old Parrish and the womenfolk had gone to sleep, worn out from trying to keep awake all night.

The edge of a white hatbrim showed outside the window, and a man's face moved into sight. It was Clint Rawls. Because of the blood he'd lost, or because he was still drugged with sleep, Steve didn't realize the significance of Clint's being there until Clint lifted his pearl-handled sixgun.

In this instant Steve Gorman threw every ounce of strength into the effort, and rolled. The sixgun roared and the explosion of it filled the bedroom. There were three fast shots. The first one sharded the windowpane and blew it into the house. Even as Steve rolled off onto the floor, the glass shards were tinkling.

Face contorted, Clint cocked the gun again. This time he intended to be sure. A women's scream rang out. Another gunshot sounded, deeper throated, and Steve knew that someone had fired a Winchester. Clint Rawls disappeared from sight.

Steve pushed drunkenly to his feet and cast a look about for his own guns. They were gone, but his trousers were folded on a chair, and he grabbed them up. He got into them and stood a moment until his head had stopped swimming.

Crossing to the window then, he glanced through the jagged edges of the pane. Clint was on the ground, obviously mortally wounded. Back near the lot gate stood Cheryl. She was holding a smoking rifle. Between her and the man on the ground, transfixed, stood old Parrish and his mousy wife.

Steve turned back to put on his boots, then reeled through the living room and went out the front door. When he finally made it around to the rear of the house, Cheryl and the Parrishes were kneeling beside the wounded man. Clint had a tight grip on his sister's arm.

"It's all right, Cheryl," he said. "If you

hadn't stopped me, I would have killed Steve. Bring me paper and pencil so I can write to Garrett."

June Culligan was coming out and she said, "I heard him. I'll get him something to write with."

Steve braced a hand against the wall of the house. "Clint," he said, "I was aiming to give you a brand-new start, and you threw it all away."

"I'm always doing something," Clint said.

By the time he'd affixed his signature to what he'd written, his strength was ebbing fast and his lips were blue.

Clint passed the paper to Parrish. "See that it reaches the sheriff."

Old Parrish stared at the bandage around Steve's chest. "Son, let me help you get back to bed. You're bleeding like a stuck hog."

That afternoon Frank Rawls and the Rocking R outfit came to take Cheryl and the body of her brother back to the ranch.

Cheryl never came back to the Culligan place as long as Steve was there, nor did her father. Two weeks from the day Culligan was buried, Steve got up and put on his clothes. Mrs. Culligan heard him and came into the bedroom.

He pointed at some double eagles he'd placed on the dresser. "That'll help you some, June. I owe you more, but that's all I've got right now."

"I wouldn't think of taking pay, Steve."

"It's not pay. Take it and use it, and maybe I'll ask for it back some day."

She nodded.

"Where are my guns?"

She turned and went to get his gunbelt and carbine from a closet.

"My horse here?"

"In the lot, Steve. I've taken care of it."

He started out, but stopped to say, "I've asked several times about Bruce Classen, but nobody would tell me."

"Sheriff Garrett started to Mission Creek with him and some masked men took Classen and hanged him."

Steve nodded. "I figured so. That was why nobody would tell me anything."

IT WAS mid-afternoon when he rode over the ridge and down upon the headquarters of the Rocking R. He saw a couple of the hands out near the corral and the cook near his doorway, but Steve didn't ride on back. He reined toward the ranch house.

None too sure of his welcome, he stopped his horse near the veranda and kept his saddle. After a time he heard a hoarse exclamation of surprise inside the house. Frank Rawls came out onto the porch.

"Light down, Steve."

The rancher tugged at his mustache, in a flustered manner. Steve dismounted and ground-tied his horse. He stepped upon the veranda.

"Are you gunning for Lew?" Rawls asked. His tone was hostile.

"Frank, I'm not gunning for anybody."

Frank Rawls looked away, and his shoulders slumped. He said, "That boy of mine heard about Classen being hung, Steve, and plumb lost his head."

Steve nodded. "He knew I sent Garrett after Classen," he said, and added, "I hate it mostly on account of Cheryl."

"She's about gotten over it. She said if she hadn't shot Clint, he would have added your murder to Burlock's."

Steve Gorman nodded. "All I can say is, it's a good thing for me she stepped out that morning to shoot a coyote in June's chicken yard."

Frank Rawls was silent, his face falling into miserable lines.

"Where is Cheryl?" Steve asked.

The rancher motioned him inside.

He entered the hall, doffed his hat, and turned into the big rug-strewn living room, where Cheryl stood with hands clasped behind her. The girl's father kept going toward the back part of the house. Cheryl searched Steve's eyes as he approached.

He said, "Would I be stepping out of my place, Cheryl, if I told you I loved you? Would you marry me and let me prove that I love you? I haven't anything now, but if you'll take me for a husband, I will have."

She needed shelter. She needed comforting. With tears in her eyes, she came into Steve Gorman's strong arms.

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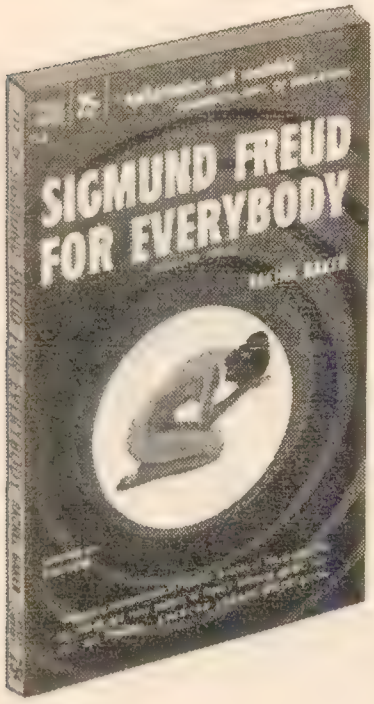

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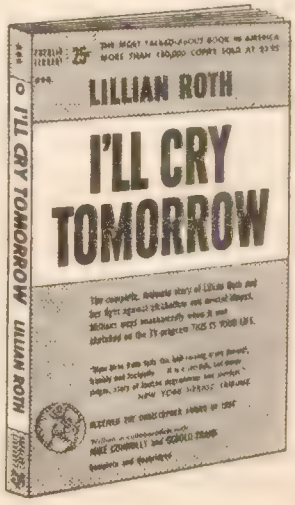


100P

"Better change your mind and come to the dance," Dave said

The Cat and

SABETHA KNEW the war was over, but she couldn't forget it . . . or stop hating Dave Evans, who had fought on the other side. . . .

SEVEN days and eighty-two miles west of Fort Kearney, just beyond Plum Creek, the wagon train made camp on good grass. From the surrey's front seat, Sabetha Seay glanced around the circle of forty sheeted wagons, locked firmly together by tongue, yoke, and ox chain. She was one of the train, yet not really one of it.

Women were cleaning up supper dishes, men hammering in tent stakes. Children had begun a game of leap frog, their yells shrill above the barking of dogs, and now Sabetha saw a group of young folks trooping toward the one-wagon gap in the corral.

When they came opposite her surrey, which stood inside the circle next to a canvas-covered farm wagon, they turned mischievous glances on the naked-bowed wagon behind it, whose bed was filled with latticed and wire-covered boxes crammed with cats.

Sabetha heard one of the girls say, "Confederate cat wagon." Catcalls mixed with their laughter.

Sabetha compressed her lips. She stooped and stroked the big black tomcat at her feet, finding a measure of companionship in the animal's responsive purring. Then she saw a stocky blond youth, fiddle clamped under elbow, leave the young folks and come toward her. Sabetha noted with chilly attention his blue Army breeches.

He stopped beside the surrey, bowed stiffly, and said, "Evening. We're having a dance over by the river, and I'd admire to have you go with me."

"I thank you kindly, sir. But I don't believe we have ever met." Her slow, reserved speech was like a door closing in his face.

"I thought that in a wagon train, everybody just—" He smiled. "I'm Dave Evans, from Ohio. I've been trying to catch your eye ever since you joined up with us."

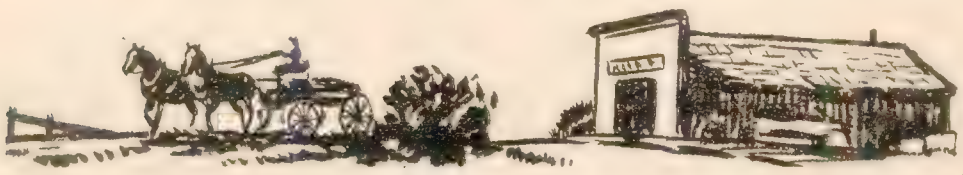
"I'm glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Evans. But I must decline your invitation."

"Tomorrow night, maybe?"

He stood looking at her in the gray light, a pint-sized girl with eyes

the Fiddler

By DABNEY OTIS COLLINS



too big, too dark for her oval face, and a mouth that made him think of red roses. A twist of black hair lay against the curve of her neck, its end not quite covering a patch on her faded calico dress. He glanced past her into the back of the curtained surrey, which was made into sleeping quarters, then shifted his gaze quickly to the trailer cat wagon.

"How many cats do you have?" he asked.

"I left home with twenty-seven. There are more now."

He said. "Cap Andrews told me about your taking a load of cats to Denver City to get rid of rats. He said you came all the way from Tennessee."

Sabetha said, "My Uncle Cleon sent for them. He keeps a store out in Denver."

"I don't aim to stay in Denver City long, myself. I'm going on to the mines." Dave tightened a string on his fiddle. "Better change your mind and come to the dance." Waiting, he pulled the bow slowly across the E string.

The black cat stirred uneasily and uttered a muted howl, as if in pain. Dave laughed. Laying the fiddle across his arm, he sawed mightily on the E string, sounding a single shrill note. And the cat lifted his head and howled as only a tomcat can.

"Well, if that don't beat all!"

"You'll get the rest of the cats to howling." Sathetha's voice held a cutting edge. "Then these people will hate me more for all the noise."

He dropped his bow hand. "Who trained your cat to sing to the fiddle?"

"Uncle Ham did, when he was a kitten."

"Well, I declare. What's his name—Rebel?"

Her large dark eyes looked at him as if from a distance. "It's Nuby."

Dave felt the hotness creep up the back of his neck. "I didn't mean anything," he said. "The war's been over since April, as far's I'm concerned."

The cat, Dave saw by the scars, was a veteran of many battles. He was blind in one eye, and white hairs of old wounds striped his side. His left ear had been chewed to a ragged nub.

Sathetha said, her face still and soft, "I want the war to be over, too. I want these folks to like me."

And I want to like them, she added to herself. But how could she, when every wagon here reminded her of the wagon that had brought her father home from Seminary Ridge to die? How could she ever forget, as long as there were people like those catcalling girls—and Mrs. Riblett?

MRS. RIBLETT, tall and flat-chested, came toward them with rustling skirts. A big brindled dog trotted beside her.

"Young lady, your cats kept me awake half the night last night." Her voice held a metallic thinness. "How can a body get any rest, with a wagonload of cats yowling their heads off all the blessed night long?" Hands on knobby hips, she awaited her answer. It came from Dave.

"I didn't hear anything but some prairie wolves."

"Wolves, my foot!" The tall, rawboned woman slanted a hard gaze into the face of the girl in the surrey. "It's got to stop, I tell you. Maybe you can sit up there all day and just ride and let your men do all your work. But the rest of us have to do our own work, and we need our sleep."

The brindled dog barked. He stood on hind legs, front paws on the surrey's floor boards, hackles erect and teeth bared. The cat, the tip of his tail moving from side to side in swift jerks, watched his enemy through dilated eyes.

"Hey! Get away from there!" Dave lifted his fiddle over the dog like a club.

"Wait!" said Mrs. Riblett.

Dave looked at Sabetha Seay. The girl's face was pale and tight. She leaned forward, one hand white-knuckled on the dashboard rail.

"Let 'em fight."

Mrs. Riblett said, "Sic 'im, Dash!" The dog growling and barking at once, caught a toe-hold on the iron step and spilled into the surrey. The spitting black cat met the attack with flashing claws. "Sic 'im, Dash, sic im!" screamed Mrs. Riblett. Standing on the cushion of the shaking surrey, Sabetha stared down with terrible intensity upon the fight

between fang and claw.

Suddenly the dog yelped and tumbled backward out of the surrey. A gash dripped red over one eye, and a flap of skin hung from his jaw. He struck the ground running. Mrs. Riblett fixed the cold hostility of her gaze on Sabetha. "You and your cats!" She moved swiftly away.

Dave touched a hand to the panting cat. "Is he hurt, do you think?"

"He may be, inside. You never can tell abount cats." She began to dry the black fur with her handkerchief.

Dave Evans's laughter rolled through the corral. "Old Nuby took that hound like Grant took—" He stopped, warned by the darkness gathering in her eyes. "I tell you what. Let's call him Stonewall."

Sabetha thought she could almost like this easy-smiling boy, if only he were wearing some other breeches. She said, "The people are waiting for you."

He nodded, but appeared to be in no hurry to leave. "Don't mind Mrs. Riblett," he said. "I've known her ever since I was born. Her bark's a lot worse'n her bite."

Dave sauntered over beside the cat wagon, taking frank appraisal of the old weather-grayed surrey with its rattly spokes and cracked oilcloth curtains.

Just outside the corral came the voice of Cap Andrews, lifted in authority. "No more fishing in the Platte, you hear?"

A boy asked querulously, "But why? We've been catching fish every night."

"Never mind how come. Get on in there where you belong."

Between the wagons, Satbetha saw the stooped, thin shape of the wagon train captain, herding her brother Clee and Uncle Ham before him.

"Call those little suckers fish?" Cap Andrew ridiculed them. "Why, I've seen the time I've pulled fish out of that old river so big one of 'em would feed your whole wagonload of cats for a week and a half."

Sabetha called, "What's the matter, Mr. Andrews?"

"I don't want anybody risking their lives. One of my hunters saw Injun sign today," he confided. "Not that I couldn't handle the whole Sioux nation, if it comes to a fight. But what's the sense of looking for trouble?" He wagged a forefinger at Dave. "Don't you agree?"

Dave grinned. "Sure, Cap," he answered. "But how's this lady going to feed all these cats without fish?"

Sabetha said quickly, "I'm not asking for any help."

The grizzled pilot eyed her as if sighting down the barrel of his rifle. He said, "Hungry cats kick up more racket'n cats with their bellies full. Folks been complaining your cats keep 'em awake."

She felt a surge of anger. "Who? Mrs. Riblett?"

"I know better'n to get mixed up in a fight between women," Cap Andrews said. Then the eyes under the floppy brim of his hat softened. "Keep 'em fed the best you can, miss. But no more fishing. We're in Injun country. And you, Dave, if you aim to do any fiddling, you'd better be getting started."

Dave said quietly, "I'll help out, Sabetha."

HER smile was quick and warm. Then she couldn't see him for the quick surge of memories of Yankees swarming all over the house. Where've you got those mules hid? Sabetha hadn't opened her mouth, not even when they slashed open the feather beds and emptied the sorghum barrel into them, or when they bayoneted the portrait of her Great-uncle Cleon.

Her smile faded. Saying, "No, thank you, Mr. Evans," she reached down a foot for the step.

It was the tiniest foot Dave had ever seen, even though it wore a homemade shoe of untanned cowhide. For an instant he felt the buoyant lightness of this girl as she balanced herself with a hand on his arm. She sprang to the ground, and now he saw the mature fullness of her.

He said, "You're the prettiest girl in the whole train, maybe in the whole world."

Sabetha murmured, "Good night, Mr. Evans," and went to where Clee and Uncle Ham were boiling fish in an iron pot.

"I heard what you told him, Sis," twelve-year-old Clee said approvingly. "We'll make out all right. We got meal. And we're milking three cows."

Uncle Ham said, stirring the fish with a forked stick, "With us traveling so fast, old Dinah is liable to drop her calf."

Clee laughed. "I'll shoot us some rabbits then, and maybe a buffalo, if the Injuns—Say, Sis, do you believe there really are Injuns close by?"

"It's what Mr. Andrews says."

She stood listening to the caller out there, to the laughter, and the music of Dave Evans's fiddle, thankful that it muted the howling of the hungry cats. She felt very much alone.

The wagons rolled on west, past Cottonwood Springs, Alkali, and Beauvais Ranch, where she bought a side of beef and a sack of meal with the last of her money.

Each day, promptly at seven, the high, clear notes of a bugle summoned the wagons to fall into their proper places in the line of march. The bugle's notes always stirred bitterness in Sabetha. She tried to put the thought from her, told herself over and over that the war was ended. But the bugle call brought it all back. Each morning it seemed to say, "You are the defeated. I am the voice of your conqueror."

She would turn in the surrey and look back at Uncle Ham, trudging beside the ox team that pulled their two wagons, then bend her glance through the rising spirals of dust down the long line of wagons to where Clee would be helping to drive the loose stock. And all else that came within her range of vision was hard and strange.

She saw the vast land, bounded only by the sky, billowing like a windy sea, its thick grass tumbling in waves dark and mysterious. She saw the sun nose its golden disk above the lip of a faraway horizon, and moon light silvering the black acres.

Wagon trains crawled before her and behind her; the white tilts were always in sight. Through the cottonwoods along the river she saw, on the other side, more wagons and long lines of huge freight wagons. Twice a day, stagecoaches of the Overland Mail charged past the westward-creeping wagons.

And one morning she saw the telegraph poles stripped of wires. Farther along the poles had been burned off at their bases. They nooned this day at a swing station in a bend of the Platte. The station's log walls rose to a flat dirt-and-brush roof, overhung with a cottonwood's green.

Uncle Ham and Clee were skinning gophers. "Cap was telling about how Injuns burned down those telegraph poles," the boy said. "They just sit around 'em smoking their pipes and keep piling on grass." He stopped, head cocked to the cat wagon. "Not more kittens?"

"Better not be," Ham grunted. "These things are hard to catch. And our cows are almost dry."

Sabetha said, "I counted nine more cats.

Clee whistled. "Let's start drowning 'em." He paused in his work to scowl at Dave Evans, who was coming toward them with a jackrabbit swinging from his hand. "What's he want?"

"Here's the buffalo I said I'd bring you." Dave dropped the rabbit beside the gophers. "Cap won't even let the hunters out of his sight now."

SABETHA took a close look at his face. It was a good face, the jaw just square enough, the mouth wide and easy-smiling, the clear brown eyes as friendly as a pup's.

"Do you think Indians are really close by?" she asked.

Dave sat on his heels, putting out a hand to the black tomcat, who slid his arched spine under it. "Oh, Cap's just trying to make everybody think the Indians are scared of him."

Clee's hight voice challenged him. "Who burnt those posts down, then?"

"Sioux. A month ago. The stage station man told me." His smile at the boy was answered by a cold stare.

Sabetha said, "Nuby doesn't take to many folks. He likes you."

Dave's stroking brought sonorous purrs. "I used to have a cat. His name was, uh, Robert E. Lee." They laughed. "Say, the lady over there at the stage station wants a cat. I told her maybe you could spare one, or some kittens."

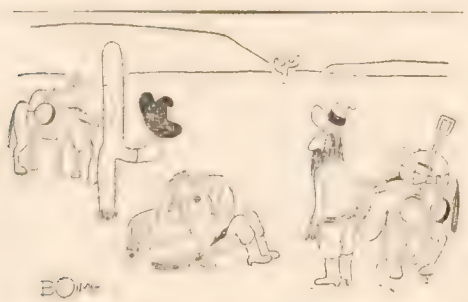
"Some kittens."

With six kittens in Sabetha's crocheting basket, they crossed the hoof-powdered dust toward the stage station. Cap Andrews rose out of a wagon's shade beside them. He

looked irritably at Dave. "You had orders not to go hunting. Do it again and you go before the council."

Dave spread his hands. "I didn't go hunting, Cap. I shot that rabbit not a hundred yards from the road. What's all this talk about Indians, anyhow? We haven't see any."

The guide looked at him as if out of an ancient wisdom. "Injuns are always where you don't see 'em. I've fought enough of



"It's not much, but it's a place where I can hang my hat."

them in my time, and I know. You hear?" He shifted his tobacco. "If we hang together I won't be afraid to fight old Red Cloud and his whole nation." He spat, turned abruptly, and sat down, adding, "Cats or no cats."

Out of his hearing, Dave said, "Old windbag. I'll bet that Green River knife stuck in his belt never cut anything but tobacco."

Nearing the swing station, Sabetha murmured, "It's strange country." The low hills reminded her of home, but they were not friendly hills. And there were no trees, nothing but grass and the blue sky spilling down, and the silence.

"It *is* strange country. But people are the same everywhere."

Her glance lifted a swift challenge to him. Then she looked away, a faint smile upturning the corners of her mouth.

"Know what's the matter with you, Sabetha?" He picked up a sagebrush twig and laid it across her shoulder. "That's what," he said unsmiling.

Sabetha stood still, her lips parted, her cheeks suddenly pale. "I'd thank you not to touch me, sir. And I'll take my kittens."

Ignoring her outstretched hand, Dave slapped the twig off her shoulder. "You're a headstrong, high-tempered, willful woman," he accused her levelly. "You say you want these people to like you. Then why don't you meet 'em halfway? And take that old newspaper off your head. A little sunburn won't kill you."

Her speech came out of a white-hot anger. "If my brother heard you talking to me like that he'd kill you. Give me my kittens—you Yankee!"

He held firmly to the basket. "People on the other side went through what you did, or even worse. You're not the only one. Think it over, Sabetha."

Dave went on toward the station with sturdy, resolute steps. She glanced over her shoulder at the surrey, stood indecisively a moment, then followed him slowly to where the stage tender's wife stood waiting in the door.

That afternoon, while Clee drove the surrey, Sabetha walked bareheaded beside the caravan, the black cat at her heels. Other women, and children, were walking, many with armfuls of flowers. Their talk and laughter passed her by. She moved toward a short, bulky woman who was trying to loosen a piece of wood slanted into the sun-baked earth.

"Here, let me help you."

The perspiring, pudding-soft face under the sunbonnet showed a grateful smile. "I'm obliged to you. I'm so sick and tired of trying to cook with buffalo chips that when I seen this little piece of wood I had to get it."

THE little piece of wood had been a wagon's tailgate. Wind-blown sand had blasted it into irregular ridges and hollows. One on each side, they worked the board back and forth, and finally the earth gave it up. There was some carving on the board.

The woman asked, "What does it say?"

"It says, 'Killed by Indians.'"

They wedged the headboard back into the ground. The cow column had now come opposite them, and they hastened to overtake the wagons. The stout woman's name was Elin Shumacher. She and her husband were on their way to Denver City, too. He was a

cobbler, like his father before him, but there wasn't a living in fixing shoes any more, seemed like.

Sabetha listened, knowing she was being asked to share the woman's loneliness. They parted with a promise to walk together tomorrow. Sabetha stopped to gather some larkspurs, and when she straightened up there was Mrs. Riblett and the brindled dog. Sabetha picked up the cat.

"One fight is enough," she said, smiling.

The tall, flat woman kicked backward at the dog, which slunk away a few feet and sat down watchfully. "No wonder you're so happy." A cold smile spread the spoke-like wrinkles radiating from her mouth. "I see you've made your catch."

Sabetha said quietly, "Let's be friends, Mrs. Riblett."

Surprise held Mrs. Riblett silent for a moment. "Well! Friends, indeed," she said. "You know the hunters can't go out far enough to get any meat. And yet you keep on feeding good fresh milk to those no-account cats, while there are a dozen mothers who need that milk to keep their children alive."

"I didn't know it was that bad. I'll be glad to share what I have."

"You didn't know it? Oh, no. You've been too busy running after that Evans man."

Sabetha held tightly to the vision of kinship with these people which had come to her while she was with Elin Shumacher. "I wish you wouldn't hate me, Mrs. Riblett."

"Why shouldn't I? You and all your kind!"

Sabetha started away. "Mrs. Riblett, you look sick."

The woman's laughter was hard. "That I am! Sick of seeing you work your poor little helpless Southern girl's charms on Dave Evans, trying to take him away from his promised wife, waiting back in Ohio."

Sabetha searched the tall woman's eyes. "I don't believe he has a girl back there," she said. "You're just making it up."

"Suppose you ask him," Mrs. Riblett said, her smile an unpleasant thing to see. "Ask him if he knows a girl named Rosemary."

Sabetha put the cat down. She glanced at the crushed stems of the larkspur, and strode swiftly away from Mrs. Riblett.

After supper, she sought out Cap Andrews. He sat hunched over a small fire, staring into its coals. She said, "I want to go on to Julesburg, alone."

His silence was long, his gaze into her face steady. "I had a squaw once had eyes like yours," he said, "big and dark and soft, like a doe." He looked again into the fire. When he lifted his head, his gaze touched Sabetha in a way that caused her to draw the Paisley shawl more closely about her throat. "Bringing all those cats clear from Tennessee to Denver City took plenty of doing, for a little gal like you."

As the mountain man began to get to his feet, Sabetha said hurriedly, "I want to go on to Julesburg, alone."

"Julesburg was burnt down in January by the Cheyenne and Sioux. They teamed up after that Sand Creek fight last fall and spread out over this whole country. It's full of 'em now, like I told you."

"But nobody's seen any Indians."

"This old man doesn't have to see the varmints. He can smell 'em." The bearded mouth shaped a smile. "You stay on here with us, Sabetha," he said gently, "and tend to your cats. Keep 'em fed, so folks can sleep." He moved past her toward the gap in the corral, his moccasins soundless on the grass.

Through that long night Sabetha lay awake, listening to the high-pitched yelping of coyotes and to the occasional drumming of gust-bellowed canvas, hearing her own thoughts. She almost wanted to call out to Dave that she knew he was under the wagon. Pushing aside the curtain, she saw the glint of moonshine on the barrel of his rifle.

One moment she felt all hot, the next cold. There was within her a wild singing, wild and free as a prairie wind, driving away all thought of Rosemary. Day was breaking when Dave stole silently away. She watched him cut across the shadowy circle of wagons.

SHE dallied at cleaning breakfast dishes until the tents had been struck, the wagons loaded and teams hooked up. "Hurry, Sis," Clee said. "They're almost ready to start."

Sabetha scoured the skillet leisurely, a smile curling along her lips. Teamsters shouted,

whips cracked, wheels rolled. And when she was ordered by Cap Andrews to go to the end of the train, as a penalty for losing her place in the line because of slowness, Sabetha still smiled.

It was mid-afternoon when she saw what she had been waiting for, a draw angling away from the left side of the road. She stopped the surrey team and looked back at Uncle Ham striding beside the three yokes of oxen. He knew what to do. Laying down his goad, he lifted a hammer from the wagon's tool box and swung it against the tire of a back wheel as if it needed tightening.

The herders passed them, Clee holding the four Seay cows, the two spare oxen, and the extra horse, behind the cat wagon. A man offered his help, but Ham shook his head. When the dust-churning cow column had passed over the hill, Sabatha drove the surrey into the draw. She had heard enough to know that Fort Rankin lay near Julesburg, about fifty miles away.

By holding to a course angling slightly to the south, they should be in Fort Rankin in four days. From there down to Denver City, the trail ran close to the South Platte all the way. There were houses and stores, and Mr. Andrews would not always be trying to scare folks with his talk of Indians.

The shotgun's flat report died without echo. Clee swung down and got the jackrabbit. He shot again. Sabetha hummed a song. Uncle Cleon's cats would have meat now, and would keep no one awake. She looked northward across the grassy swells, thinking Mrs. Riblett won't accuse me any more of trying to break up your engagement, Dave.

The draw broke abruptly upon a gulch, its cutbank plunging a straight twenty feet to a sandy bed threaded by a small stream. Sabetha turned the surrey team south along the rim. Shadows had begun to soften the folded hills before a crossing was made. Clee and Uncle Ham filled the water kegs, and they made camp in a swale.

"There are rabbits around here by the million," Clee said.

Ham laughed. "The cats are going to fatten up now. Old Dinah is having her calf tonight."

Sabetha stood first guard over the stock. Nearby, the black cat cautiously prowled the dewy grass. Like a sleeping sea, the prairie reached into the solid wall of the night. Sabetha felt as if she were alone in this world, a feeling intensified by the low, sad call of a prairie owl.

She had told herself, as she had told Clee and Uncle Ham, that she had left the caravan because the cats were starving and keeping folks awake, and that they would be happier traveling by themselves. But was the real reason Mrs. Riblett, or Dave Evans? I don't know, she thought. Last night, there under the wagon, I was almost scared of the way I felt. Her gaze was still on the moon when Clee came to relieve her.

"Just listen to those owls. They sound—" The boy stopped. "Where are the horses?"

Sabetha searched the darkness. "They were right over there a minute ago. I'll go look for them." The cat followed her through the tall grass.

Sabetha did not begin to imagine she saw Indians skulking in every pool of shadow until she knew she was lost. Giving up on trying to find the horses in this direction, she had turned back to where she thought the wagon to be, but had floundered into a brush-choked draw.

Finally gaining the rim, she had called to Clee, then to Ham, her cry sounding terrifyingly loud in the empty darkness, but bringing no answer. Now fear had its icy grip on her. She had no way of knowing how far she had come, or in what direction. There was nothing but the soundless immensity and those stealthily moving shadows.

From far away the cry came again, Dave's cry. "Sabetha!" It knifed the silence. "Sabetha, where are you?"

Answer rose to her throat, struggled a moment with her pride, died there. She could not bring herself to call out. His cry sounded again. The night swallowed it.

THEN it came, the high, thin wail of a fiddle's E string. The single note reached out into the solid dark, searching, sobbing for its answer. And behind her Nuby echoed the note with an agonized howl.

She moved slowly forward. Dave was running toward her, rifle in one hand, fiddle in

the other. He stumbled to a stop beside her, his breathing a terrible thing to hear.

"Sabetha, I thought I'd lost you."

"Dave," she said, "I thought I'd lost you, too."

Cap Andrews, she heard him say, had had every man in the train out hunting her, and also Mrs. Shumacher and Mrs. Riblett. Sabetha pulled herself away from Dave.

She said, "Mrs. Riblett told me about Rosemary."

"I know. She's up there now telling everybody what she told you about me and Rosemary. She's been just like a crazy woman ever since we found out you were gone. Kept saying she drove you away to be scalped. Poor old soul."

"I was more at fault than she. I can see it now."

"Poor old soul," he repeated. "You know, her husband and their boy Jim—he was about my age—went to Kansas to homestead. Quantrell's guerrillas hung 'em both."

Sabetha spoke out of a long silence. "What about Rosemary, Dave?"

He echoed the name softly. "She wasn't brave enough to come with me, and she wouldn't promise to wait. That's the way it is, Sabetha."

Their hands came together. They went toward the sounds of men's shouting, Nuby tiptoeing daintily beside them. The warmth in Sabetha made a wonderful singing. She was one of them now.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Jackson Hole, a large flat basin of ranch and farm country near the Teton Mountains, is famous also for the world's largest elk herd. What state?

2. Is "lynx" just another name for "bobcat?"

3. In what Western state will you find West Point, Mount Vernon, Saratoga, Albany, Buffalo and Rochester?

4. To what roping contest does the expression "throwing it over his withers" apply?

5. The lowest temperature (70 below zero) ever recorded in the U.S. was in a National Park, the highest (145 degrees) in a National Monument. Can you name them?

6. Which of the following is a *mestizo:* a person who is half-Spanish, half-Indian; one who is half-Mexican, half-American; or just any half-breed?

7. What Western state, as a governmental unit under Spanish, Mexican and American rule, has had more governors than any other state in the U.S.A.?

8. Most Southwestern cowboys know the Spanish names of Western wild animals and often use them. Can you translate at least three of the following: (1) lobo, (2) cíbolo, (3) berrendo, (4) conejo, (5) liebre, (6) tusa, (7) leoń, (8) ratoń, (9) tejoń, (10) venado?

9. In what way is the second toe on a beaver's hind foot different from that of any other padded-foot animal?

10. What part of the West was the stomping ground of the following outlaws: Joaquin Murieta, Tom Bell, Rattlesnake Dick, Black Bart, Dick Fellows and Tiburcio Vasque?

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 113. **Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.**

The Cursed Treasure of Laredo

ONE century plus one year have passed since Don Margarito Sanchez, Alcalde of Laredo, Texas, buried seven hundred and fifty pounds of silver at the base of a gnarled mesquite tree, not far from the Rio Grande River, which divides the American republic from Mexico.

But Don Margarito's liveried coachman can still be seen on moonlit nights, riding in a magnificently gilded carriage to search for the

a true story by
Harold Preece

missing treasure and its vanished marker. The spectral pickaxes of the Alcalde's ghostly workmen can still be heard, frantically excavating different spots that yield nothing but annoyed Betty bugs and crumbling fragments of goats' bones.

The story goes back to 1849, when Thomas Foster, a quadroon, married a Mexican girl named Theodora Sanchez, no kin to Don Margarito Sanchez, the alcalde and aristocrat. After the wedding, Foster brought his bride home to a rock house built in a tangled wilderness at the edge of the town.

Mexican goatherders later built a dozen or so shacks on the Foster rancho. As the population of this squatter community increased, men began felling the larger mesquite trees for firewood.

Several hundred yards from the Foster house stood a tall mesquite with iron spikes driven into its trunk to form a crude cross. The goatherds felt that this emblem indicated some kind of charm, and were careful not to touch an ax to the tree.

But skeptical Mrs. Foster laughed at their fears, and curtly ordered the mesquite chopped down. Reluctantly the herdsmen obeyed her command, pulling out the spikes and throwing them away before dividing the wood with the mistress of the rancho. During the course of the winter, the wood was consumed in the settlement's fireplaces, and not even a stump remained to mark the site where the tree had stood.

Five years passed. Then on an afternoon in 1854, Mrs. Foster received an unexpected caller. A stately carriage drew up before her door. When the coachman halted the four spanking gray horses, Alcalde Sanchez stepped out.

While the curious goatherds looked on, the Alcalde began anxiously scanning the area. He frowned hard at patches of stump that had replaced thickets of mesquite. His severe Castilian face became increasingly worried as he tramped across the denuded ground. The coachman waited patiently, without deigning to speak a word to any member of the Foster household while his master scoured the rancho.

Ten years before, the Alcalde declared arrogantly, he had buried five *cargas* of Mexican coins called *reales* at the base of the mesquite, in order to keep the treasure from falling into the hands of marauding Apache Indians. A carga is a Spanish unit of weight standing for one hundred and fifty pounds. A real (pronounced rayall) had, at that time, an exchange rate of twelve and a half cents in United States currency. Therefore the total value of the Alcalde's lost silver probably ranged from twenty-five to fifty thousand dollars.

Foster family tradition recalls that the poor woman was at her wit's end as the Alcalde continued to fire questions about the tree. Margarito Sanchez was a rich man, commanding much prestige and influence on both sides of the international border. But the quadroon's wife had been born a poor peon of the dark mestizo stock which lived in mortal terror of the light-skinned grandees like Don Margarito.

Should she confess that she'd ordered her herdsmen to cut the tree? Would Don Margarito, who loved money as he loved the gold lace on his exquisite garments, believe her? If she told him frankly that she could not remember the location of the tree, would he conclude that she'd discovered the silver and then destroyed the marked mesquite to remove evidence of guilt?

But if he failed to unearth the treasure, might he not, as Laredo's combined mayor and judge, order her evicted from the rancho to which she held only squatter's title? Or, perhaps, imprison her for cutting trees that were not her rightful property?

A half-truth seemed the obvious defense. So Mrs. Foster took what she considered the easiest way. "The goatherds keep hacking down trees for firewood, Senor Alcalde," she mumbled. "No doubt they cut down the big mesquite. But," pointing her finger to a space a hundred yards away, "I think it stood right over there."

Don Margarito accepted her story and left, but returned the next day with a crew of peons bearing picks and shovels. For many months thereafter, the Alcalde and his workers were as much a part of the landscape as the thorn bushes and cactus patches.

They uprooted hundreds of stumps. Their tools scarred the pastures with deep, gaping cavaties, so that the goats had to leap long lines of trenches to reach the grass. Throughout the feverish operations, the Fosters were too fearful of the iron-handed despot in charge to complain about the destruction of their excellent grazing range.

WRATHFUL and disappointed, Don Margarito finally gave up the quest. Then he summoned the Foster family into his courtroom. "You found the treasure and stole it," he declared. "But to my sorrow, I have no visible evidence on which to jail you.

But I pronounce on you a punishment that is in no book of law. On you and your children and your children's children I lay a curse for a hundred years, or until your descendants shall deliver up the silver or its value in American dollars to my descendants." The he signalled a bailiff to remove the despised mixed-bloods from his presence.

Shortly afterward, Don Margarito and his coachman both died when their carriage was overturned in a roadside accident. Thomas Foster, the quadroon, soon followed them into eternity. Three females were left to occupy the rancho—the widowed Theodora, her aged mother, Marta Torres Sanchez, and Paulina Foster, her adopted daughter.

For a whole year nothing out of the ordinary happened on the squatter domain. Mrs. Foster, a practical woman, dismissed the dead Alcalde and his curse from a mind preoccupied with basic things like repairing her pastures and haggling for the best prices from the Laredo wool buyers.

Then on June 11, 1855, one year to the day after the final session with Don Margarito, the family was awakened in the early morning by the rumbling of wheels and the pounding of hoofs.

Peering through the window, they saw the Alcalde's carriage drawn by four pale gray horses. They recognized the dim figure of the coachman perched in the box. But nobody stepped from the vehicle as it stood parked before the Foster gate. If Don Margarito were incarnating himself in the human sphere of existence, he was haughtily making himself invisible.

For half a minute, the women watched. Half a minute more passed, and then from every corner of the ranch came the sound of picks digging and shovels rattling. The coachman kept vigil for half an hour as if he were waiting for someone to return—perhaps his master. At the end of that frightening thirty minutes, he turned the gray stallions and drove away.

Time after time, on moonlit evenings for generations that followed, the Fosters and other Texas Mexicans claimed to have witnessed the same phenomena. The apparitions and the sounds of digging were repeated so often that the whole neighborhood acquired the reputation of being haunted. The goat herds and their families eventually deserted the rancho, blaming the Fosters for having brought a curse on the community.

Within a few years, the ranch fell into ruins. The dazed older women barred their windows, bolted their doors and withdrew from the living world.

Paulina Foster escaped the morbid confinement only by eloping at fourteen with the peon youth, Juan Galvez. But the other two women, buried in their self-imposed prison, continued to see the coach stopping and hear the tools clinking. Both were eventually found dead, their corpses, dirty and emaciated, by Laredo authorities who forced their way into the moldering house.

Through long generations, the Foster descendants have made one futile attempt after another to lift the curse by trying to find the treasure, so that it may be restored intact to the heirs of the Alcalde. The sons of Juan and Paulina Galvez spent many hours sweating and digging, as did their grandsons and great-grandsons.

Their labor brought nothing but calloused hands and aching muscles. Not one coin was ever uncovered, not one tangible clue that would lead to the missing silver—because according to legend, the fortune was already cursed when Don Margarito hid it in the rough Texas soil.

Border tradition asserts that business associates of the Alcalde orginally accumulated

the money by illicit sales of guns and powder to the Apaches. Afterward, according to this story, Don Margarito saw to it that his partners were massacred by those same tribesmen. It was apparently the workings of the poetic justice that decided the Alcalde should lose the reales, because they were acquired through bloodshed and tainted dealings.

However, that may be, fate has offered no help to the harassed Foster-Galvez clan. When oil was first discovered in Southwestern Texas, the inheritors of the curse prayed that the precious black fluid might also be found on their land, so that they might settle Don Margarito's ghostly claim with cash paid to his posterity. But not one drop of oil ever spurted on the run-down tract.

The curse ran its hundred-year span in June of 1955. Foster descendants hoped then that Don Margarito's ghost would finally resign itself to the loss and leave off haunting them.

But even yet the wheels keep rolling, the tools keep swinging. The carriage is said to have appeared again on the night of July 8, 1954, and also on the evening of August 1st following.

Freshly-dug holes continue to appear in the abandoned pastures, now nourishing only rabbits and the stray cattle of the Rio Grande bushes.

Professional treasure hunters, of whom Texas is full, shun the site. Don Margarito's sophisticated descendants shrug their shoulders at the old tale, but those who trace their humble lineage to Thomas and Theodora Foster do not.

Those of the mixed-blood caste have no faith that the visitations will cease in this century, or in any millenia to come. "Don Margarito always collected every penny that was due him," they maintain. "A million years from now he will still be demanding his reales, and still sending his servants to search for them."

Then, in a statement reflecting the ancient Aztec tradition still lingers in these mestizos, they add, "Time, senor, has meaning only for live ones. To the Dead Ones, it is but a minute of nothing."

RANCH
FLICKER
TALK

A Roundup of Movie News Presented By
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A Review of Universal's
RED SUNDOWN
starring
RORY CALHOUN *and* MARTHA HYER

•

PLUS A WORD-AND-PICTURE PERSONALITY SKETCH OF
JAMES MILLICAN

Ellen Proves Up

by
Leola Lehman

From his tales of school, Kane saw how much Bobby liked Miss Ellen

GRIM faced, Kane Grayson watched the young woman marching up the dirt road toward his soddy. It was Miss Ellen, Bobby's teacher, coming to call—coming to tell him how to raise Bobby, rather.

Every woman within riding distance had felt that urge at one time or another since Cora Lee had run out on Kane and his son, that day three years ago. Kane had been expecting Miss Ellen since she came to teach at Prairie Junction school, a month ago. His lips stayed tight as he turned back to mending

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NO ONE STOOD between little Bobby and death but a woman . . .

and Kane had no faith in anything a flighty female could do

the broken hame strap. He'd let Miss Ellen know her advice wasn't wanted—or her company either. If there was one thing he and Bobby didn't need around, it was a woman.

Without looking up, Kane heard the woman's footsteps falter to a stop nearby. He hammered a nail home, then turned when the quiet voice spoke.

"Mr. Grayson, could I speak with you for a few minutes?"

Unsmiling, Kane faced her. A scrubbed-looking girl in her middle twenties, Ellen Williams gave the impression of strength, in spite of her slender figure and appealing young face. There was something about the firm set of her full lips and the straight way she looked him in the eye that caught at Kane in spite of himself. Angered, he frowned at her.

"What do you want to see me about?" he demanded stiffly.

Ellen's shoulders straightened, but there was nothing in her quiet voice to tell if she felt angry or embarrassed at Kane's curt question. "It's about Bobby," she began.

But Kane cut in. A hard anger blazed up inside him. "Suppose you just leave Bobby to me, Miss Ellen. We're fine, and we can get along without any woman's interference." A muscle jerked along his lean jaw. "If he breaks the rules, thrash him; otherwise leave him to me." He turned back to his work. Their talk was over, and he wished she would go.

For a moment there was no sound except that of Zeb swilling water over at the tank. Then Ellen spoke again. It wasn't exactly defeat in her voice, just a kind of acceptance of what she had expected, Kane thought.

"I've been told," she said evenly, "that a visit to you would do no good. But I wanted to try anyway. A thrashing for Bobby was not what I had in mind."

Savagely Kane jerked the hame into a better working position. Couldn't the woman see she wasn't wanted?

"Good-by, Mr. Grayson."

Ellen's footsteps started back toward the road that led to the schoolhouse, a mile and a half away. Kane went on working, half blind with the turmoil inside him.

Sure, Miss Ellen knew it would do no good to come talk to him. She'd probably heard it from every woman hereabouts who had tried the same thing, after Cora Lee ran off with that harvester salesman. They would pass the word along, all right. A hard knot came in his chest, as it always did when he thought of that time . . . Cora Lee gone, and women coming in to tell him what to do, and him hating the lot of them.

How could they know what it did to a man when his wife left like Cora Lee had? He had known that she hated the lonely pioneer life on the claim, but he had felt it was a weakness she should fight, not give in to. And then she had just walked out, one day.

Kane's big hand gripped the smooth hammer handle until his knuckles strained white against the dark wood. What could any of these women know of a man's feelings at a time like that? The days when he worked himself to exhaustion to forget were endurable, but the nights— Even yet he broke out in a sweat remembering those nights when he awoke from a dream of holding his wife in his arms, reached for her in the darkness, and found emptiness.

When that happened he got out of bed and tramped the prairie until dawn, unable to rest for the pain and fury that tore at him. Miss Ellen was right; it would do no good for any woman to tell him what to do for Bobby. Women were weak and could only bring a man harm.

FINISHED with the hame strap, Kane went into the soddy to cook supper. Bobby came in as he sliced thick slabs of bacon into a skillet, and he watched the boy as he wandered about the cluttered room. One of his overall suspenders was fastened up with a shingle nail, and his sun-bleached hair had an uncombed look about it, but those things were not important. Kane an the kid got along fine.

For a minute he wished he had found out what the teacher had in mind, but it was too late now. He forked the sizzling strips of bacon about in the pan.

"Any trouble at school, son?" Kane asked, keeping his back to Bobby.

There was a momen't silence, and Kane glanced over his shoulder at the boy. Bobby stood in front of the little square window,

tossing his pocket knife up and catching it. His thin shoulders squared as Kane watched, and he turned to face his father.

"Naw. No trouble." It was a short answer, but Bobby never talked much.

Kane went back to his cooking. He didn't feel quite easy, but he finally pushed Miss Ellen's visit to the back of his mind. She was just one more nosy female.

It was a couple of weeks, and three bloody noses for Bobby, later, when Kane learned what was up. Some of the other children had tormented Bobby about his mother's running away, and he had fought them. It hurt Kane that Bobby had to pay along with him, and he was grateful in a reluctant way when Miss Ellen put a stop to the childrens' cruelty. He tried talking to Bobby.

"What people say doesn't matter," he told the child. But it sounded weak, even to him, and he let up.

So Miss Ellen helped Kane and Bobby, in spite of his wish that she leave them alone. She refused to take his gruff way to heart, as the other women had. But Kane refused to be friendly.

When a box supper was held to raise money for school benches, Kane scrubbed Bobby's freckled face and they went. Nobody could say he didn't do his part to keep up the school. When the auctioneer set a box on the table, all wrapped in white tissue paper with a bunch of blue imitation violets nestled on top, he bid on it.

The box belonged to Miss Ellen, and Kane felt his face turn hot under the curious glances of his neighbors. He wanted to get out and go home. He'd sooner just contribute what he could toward the benches, and cut out this tomfoolery, but it was too late to back down now.

Kane looked once at Miss Ellen's face as she came over to sit beside him. There was no sign of amusement or regret in her expression because he had bid on her box. She greeted him pleasantly. Awkwardly, Kane turned an apple box on its side and sat down on it, beside Ellen. He fumbled a moment at the wrappings, then shoved it at her.

"Afraid I don't know how to get into this box," he said, angry at himself for being so nervous at her nearness.

Ellen's white teeth flashed in a warm smile. "Some things just aren't meant for men to handle."

Her slim fingers picked at the ribbon and flowers. In a moment the tissue paper crackled as she pulled it back from the shoebox inside. She lifted the lid and held the picnic lunch out to him.

But Ellen's words had brought a guarded look to Kane's face. They sounded like the opening wedge for some advice to him. He didn't answer, just sat silently eating the flaky bread-and-butter sandwiches and crunchy pieces of chicken.

Serenely, Ellen spoke of this and that. She ignored his lowering face and Kane noticed, in spite of himself, the quietness and gentleness in the girl. She had none of the nervous, flighty ways he'd known in Cora Lee. Their hands accidentally touched over the lunchbox, and Kane jerked back as if he had been stung.

Suddenly he wanted to touch Ellen, wanted to gather her to him and feel the sweet softness of her against him. The woman hunger he had forced back in the past years rushed over him in a flood, and he felt a trembling start inside him. His hand gripped the apple he held until it was crushed. Ellen's eyes grew wide and troubled as he stared at her. That brought him to his senses, and he stumbled to his feet with a mumbled good-by.

He snagged Bobby away from where he sat with the other youngsters, and set out at a fast walk for home. Bobby wasn't ready to go.

"It's not over, Pa," he shrilled. "There's to be singing after the eats."

Bobby's protest was just an annoyance, like a fly buzzing too close. "Time to get home," Kane muttered.

For the first time in over a year, Kane walked the prairie that night. Anger and a kind of fear fought in him. He had thought that no woman could ever trouble him again, and now he couldn't get the picture of Ellen out of his mind. No matter how he tried to think of crops and work, it was her quiet eyes and soft mouth that he saw.

He felt tricked, and tried to tell himself that he despised Ellen, as he did all women; that she was as weak and untrustworthy as the rest. He slashed at a Russian thistle in

the fence row. Ellen was no different from Cora Lee and the rest.

For a moment Kane stood leaning on a fence post. He wondered if Cora Lee were still with her new husband, and realized with surprise that the thought didn't tear at him as it had before. Along toward morning he fell across his bed and slept, numb with weariness. He had learned one thing—he had to stay away from Ellen Williams for his own peace of mind.

WHEN Bobby came home from school with tales of how Miss Ellen had done this or said that, Kane saw the liking the child had for her. His voice would turn harsh as he silenced the talk. Finally Bobby learned not to mention his teacher.

Winter came and the cold bit into Kane when he stepped outside. The wind tore across the prairie without letup. Kane and Bobby made their last trip of the winter to the county seat for supplies, bacon, flour, and coffee beans. Then winter set in in earnest.

It was on a Wednesday afternoon when Kane was mending fence that he saw mares' tails of clouds sweep across the sky. He worked on, but there was something keyed up and electric in the air. After a while he looked north and saw the heavy black clouds boiling in. Kane knew what that meant. No man lived long in this country without learning what a blue norther looked like when it came in. There was no other sight like it in the world.

Instantly, Kane dropped his work and ran to where Zeb grazed nearby. He swung up and spoke sharply to the horse. That storm was close! Zeb caught some of Kane's urgency and stretched out in a long gallop across the fields. Then the storm struck. There was an uneasy puff or two of wind, and then the world was a shrieking, raging inferno of icy cold.

Kane's breath was thrust back down his throat, and he pounded his hands together to keep them from freezing as he urged Zeb on. A snowflake spun down in front of him, and then came a handful. Two minutes later he couldn't see his hand before his face. He lost all sense of direction, and gave the horse his head in the hope that he would find his way alone back to the soddy. Kane's great worry was Bobby. Was the boy out in this blizzard, or had he reached home safely before it struck?

Pictures of the child fighting against the fierce blasts of wind sickened him. In the past, teachers of Prairie Junction school had always let the children out in time to get home ahead of storms, but this one had come in fast. They might just have gotten started when it hit. Fear built up in him, and he tried to urge the floundering horse on even while he knew it was no use. Zeb was doing his best without urging from Kane.

After what seemed like an eternity, the horse came to a shuddering stop. We must be home, Kane thought, and slid to the ground. His feet were numb with cold, and he almost fell, but he managed to stagger a few steps. He held to the reins. Have to get Zeb to the lee side of the house, he told himself.

The cold was a knife in his lungs, and it seemed too much effort to take another step, but he forced himself on. Once he fell and lay for a moment. He didn't want to get up, but he thought of Bobby and staggered once more to his feet. Was the boy in the house?

Moments later he bumped into the solid wall of the soddy, and felt along with his clublike hands. He came to a corner and breathed deeply with relief. The wind was partly cut off here. He dropped the reins and groped on toward the door. He had trouble opening the door with his stiff hands, but finally made it and stepped inside.

It was as dark as the ace of spades there. Gulping air in the sudden quiet of the house, Kane felt about for the matches. All the while the knowledge that Bobby wasn't home bore down on him. Bobby would have lit the lamp if he'd reached here safely. The terrible truth of that possessed him as he struck a match and touched it to the wick of the lamp. Was his kid out in this white hell?

THE yellow flame of the lamp threw shadows about the room, and Kane peered about, hoping against hope. Bobby wasn't there. Knowing in the back of his mind that it was useless, but unable to stay inside when he might be able to find the child, he rolled a blanket and headed out again into the

screaming storm. Perhaps he'd lose his way before he got a hundred yards, but he had to find Bobby if he could.

Bobby was such a little guy. All at once Kane wished that he had been more affectionate with the boy, hadn't always worked so hard at making him tough and self-reliant. Perhaps some softness is good after all, he thought.

The wind slashed at Kane and the snow blinded him. Moments later, he knew that he was hopelessly lost. He pulled up and tried to gain some sense of direction, but it was no use. Bitterly disappointed, he gave Zeb his head once more and trusted to the horse to get him home. When he got inside the soddy again an hour later, the longest night of his life began.

After he had built a fire, Kane walked the floor, while the blizzard raged like a live thing outside. If he just knew what had happened! Perhaps Miss Ellen had kept the children at school. She must have heard from the other settlers how storms sometimes whipped in without warning. If he just knew!

To keep busy, Kane fried pan after sizzling pan of bacon, and baked biscuits enough for a dozen people. As soon as he could get out he would head for the school. If the kids were there they would be hungry—if they were not frozen. Stories of how whole families sometimes froze to death tormented him. He rolled the food in a blanket and waited again.

Several times he opened the door and gauged the storm. He was tempted to make another try, but common sense held him back. No living thing could last long in that raging inferno of ice and wind.

The old alarm clock hanging on the wall said ten o'clock, the following morning, before there was a drop in the storm. When he heard the change in the wind, Kane put on his heavy coat and stepped outside. The snow had let up too but it was a stark, dead world. He decided he could make it now, so he strapped the pack of food behind Zeb's saddle and started. The horse was tired and had hard going, but Kane urged him on. Bobby's life depended upon the good sense of a woman, and Kane felt no security in that.

The cold bit into the very marrow of his bones, and when Zeb floundered through big drifts of snow he thought in panic that his son might be buried under any one of them. He had to force himself to keep going and not tear into them like a madman. If Bobby had stayed at the school and gotten through the night without freezing Kane could help him if he went on. Giving way to panic would accomplish nothing.

Almost two hours later the weary horse

RANCH RHYTHM

By LIMERICK LUKE

There was a young cowgal named Edie,

Whose hips were quite supple indeedy!

At all of the dances

She won lots of glances

For movements more novel than speedy!

drew up before the schoolhouse door. Kane looked, and his heart sank. No smoke came out of the black stovepipe above the little, unpainted building. He half fell out of the saddle, pounded on the door, and fumbled with the latch. Then new hope caught at him. He heard a tramping sounding inside. He finally fought the door open. Then he stared.

Seven children tramped up and down the room, and Miss Ellen walked along behind. They looked like people in a trance or a nightmare. Their white faces were tearstained and their eyes half closed with weariness as they staggered along. Kane heard a monotonous chant.

"Clap your hands, clap your hands." It was Miss Ellen, and she looked more tired than the children.

BOBBY saw Kane first, since he led the pitiful little line. He wavered and stared as though he couldn't believe what he saw. Then Kane had him tight in his arms.

"Okay, kid?"

His voice was husky and he pressed the child to him, feeling reluctant to put him down. But there was work to be done. The marching children had broken line and now stood about in a dazed way. Kane looked at Miss Ellen and his eyes said what he didn't take time to express in words.

"Where's the ax?" He saw tears fill the girl's eyes, and it was obviously an effort for her to speak.

"There, over in the corner."

The new school benches were all gone, and a scattering of splinters on the bare floor told their own story. Kane swung the ax over his shoulder and started for the door. Then he remembered the food and handed it to Ellen.

"Perhaps this will help until I get a fire going." He riffled Bobby's shock of hair and hurried outside.

There was no wood in the shed, and he had to cut up the hitch-rack, but it wasn't long before he had a roaring blaze in the pot-bellied heater. The children pressed close and went to sleep in the warmth, with half-eaten bacon sandwiches in their hands. Soon parents began to arrive for their children, and after a while only Kane and Ellen were left, with the sleeping Bobby. Kane looked at Ellen. "You saved the lives of every child here, Miss Ellen," he said.

Ellen smiled at him tiredly. "Must I still be Miss Ellen, Kane?" She shook her head as if she were defeated at last in trying to make him like and trust her. "Can't I ever prove up where you're concerned?"

The past fell away from Kane, and in two swift steps he was by her side. "Ellen," he said. His arms went about her, drew her to him.

Ellen's face rested against his chest, and he lifted her face to his. Later, with Ellen's head pressed to his shoulder, Kane stared out the window, but it wasn't the snow he saw. It was his claim, with its rich earth—his home and Bobby's—and beside them this girl who had, indeed, proved up.

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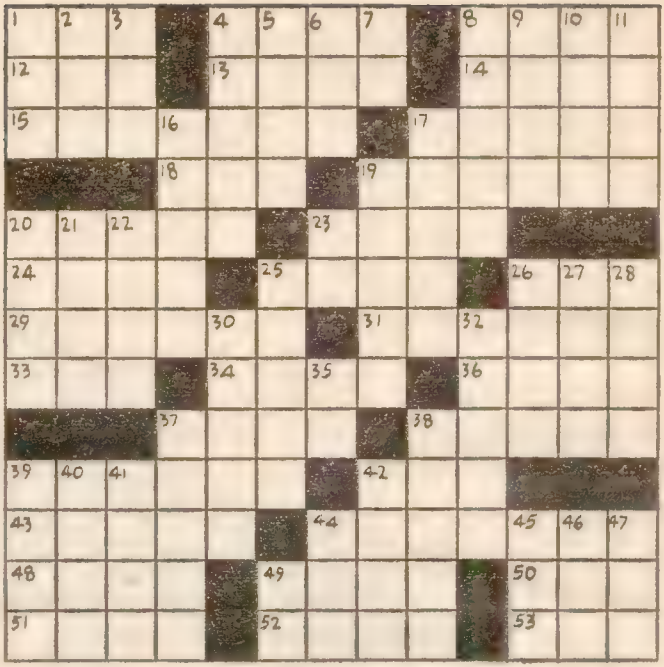
THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



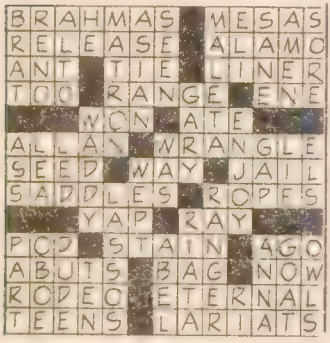
The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1. Is the owner of
4. To mix with spoon
8. Food (slang)
12. Writing fluid
13. Large book
14. Actor's part
15. Saddle attachment
17. Galloped easily
18. Rowing implement
19. Lariats
20. Cowboy
23. Puts in place
24. Land measure
25. Mormon State
26. Not bright
29. Fires a gun
31. Group of saddle horses
33. Liveliness (slang)
34. To destroy
36. Fruit drinks
37. To whip
38. To move furtively
39. Cattle enclosure
42. Mouser
43. In advance
44. Horse out of control
48. Legal claim
49. Group of cattle
50. Frozen water
51. To double upon itself
52. In an idle manner
53. Tennis court divider

DOWN

1. The man's
2. Small insect
3. Snow runner
4. Wandering steer
5. Circular journey
6. Little devil
7. Musical note
8. To intersect
9. Jumps on one foot
10. Oleomargarine
11. Marries
16. Wild West show
17. Machine tool
19. To acquire knowledge
20. Stinging insect
21. Dull pain
22. To let fall
23. Street (abbr.)
25. Customary
26. An Easterner out West
27. Thought
28. False face
30. To walk
32. Horse blanket
35. The thing
37. To mark, as cattle
38. Full of sand
39. Young cow
40. Where Cleveland is
41. To stagger
42. Ringlet of hair
44. Scarlet
45. To take first prize
46. Top card
47. Nevertheless
49. Hello!



Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

The Town that Insulted a President

THE rough-and-tumble southern Oregon mining town of Jacksonville bustled with excitement that September of 1880. The big news spread rapidly through the diggings.

"Hey there, Dirty Charlie! The President of these here United States is coming to Jacksonville. He'll be here next week."

Fresh paint was slopped on the rough collection of buildings along the main streets. Flags and bunting were draped from the facades. Proprietors swept the board walks for the first time in years. Miners took their first baths since Christmas.

An official welcoming committee gathered at the Table Rock saloon. They were up against a problem. Where would President Rutherford B. Hayes and his party stay? The swank new United States Hotel was

a true story of the West by Ellis Lucia

not quite ready to open. Perhaps the owner could be prevailed upon to rush things a bit.

The owner, Madame Holt, a French lady, agreed to get a suite ready for the president. She would be honored to have such a distinguished guest inaugurate her new hostelry. Carpenters and painters worked frantically, day and night. Wall-to-wall carpeting was laid, and fancy draperies hung at the windows. The rooms were furnished with the finest upholstery that could be obtained.

There was good reason for President Hayes's visit. He had heard a lot about rowdy old Jacksonville and wanted to see it for himself. It was to be one of the highlights of his Western tour.

By 1880 the cocky, thriving frontier town had survived the invasion of 10,000 gold-crazy miners, continuous skirmishes with the Rogue River Indians, squabbling between Yankee and Southern sympathizers, a near-starvation winter, several disastrous fires, a scarlet fever epidemic, numerous shootings and hangings, and the normal series of barroom brawls. The visit of a President could, therefore, be taken in stride.

Like many of its counterparts, Jacksonville was conceived in the lust for gold which inflamed the early West. Twenty-nine years before Hayes's visit, the young Jackson brothers halted for water along what was to become Jackson Creek. The exact spot is in dispute, but there was nothing uncertain about the gold found there.

The excited brothers couldn't keep their mouths shut. Miners swarmed into the Siskiyou Mountain country. By the following year a boisterous log and tent city had mushroomed, where get-rich-quick tales flowed as fluently as drinks across the bars of the seventeen saloons.

The gold seekers were so excited they built Jacksonville right on top of the bonanza they were after. The streets were virtually paths of gold, honeycombed with mining tunnels. The county courthouse was financed with yellow dust from its own excavations. Two enterprising prisoners, serving a stretch in the calaboose, profited handsomely by sinking a shaft in their cell floor.

There were many sensational strikes. Over $30,000,000 in gold dust crossed the counter of the Beekman bank. A homesick tenderfoot sifted enough dust from a street to pay his way back East. Each home had its backyard mine. Still visible, these mines were worked diligently in the depression-ridden thirties of this century.

The network of mines beneath Jacksonville's streets caused no end of trouble during snow runoffs. Sections of streets would suddenly collapse. Houses would seek lower levels. But the second winter after gold was discovered was Jacksonville's worst. Heavy snows clogged the passes. Supplies dwindled. Flour and salt were as precious as the yellow stuff. Salt was weighed on gold scales for equal exchange.

When Pie John learned Peter Britt was hoarding flour, the baker stirred up public wrath against him. Britt turned over the flour for bread, but Pie John made apple pies instead, selling them for fabulous prices.

BRITT and his son found greater wealth and satisfaction photographing the roaring community than they did in the creek beds. The two men took thousands of pictures, including the first of famed Crater Lake.

There was always plenty on which to focus a camera. Shootings, knifings and robberies were regular occurrances. During Indian raids, women and children were herded into the solid-brick Brunner, Masonic and Oddfellows buildings. The structures had dirt roofs two feet deep, as fireproofing against flaming Indian arrows.

Her kitchen apron flying, an angry pioneer woman once rushed bravely to the village square to chop down the Confederate flag. The Methodist church was built in 1854 from a fund started by gambling bets.

In the smallpox epidemic, the town lived for weeks in a heavy pall of smoke from pitch-pine knots burned to drive out the disease. Still, the epidemic took over forty lives. In happier days. Jacksonville celebrated in turbulent fashion. Frolicking soldiers once set off an extra-heavy cannon charge, breaking nearly every window in town.

These were the stories that reached the President's ear, attracting him to the colorful mining center. Late one afternoon his private

stagecoach rolled up Jacksonville's wagon-rutted main street, halting before the United States Hotel. With the president were Mrs. Hayes, General William T. Sherman, and four aides.

A sizable gathering of citizens turned out to greet the chief executive. Hayes alighted, graciously awaiting whatever hospitality was arranged. He was warmly welcomed by the mayor and other local dignitaries. Hayes said a few brief words to the gatherings. Then, stiff, hot, and dusty from the trip, he retired to his newly-finished suite.

Later, President Hayes and his party toured the town. They saw where gold was first discovered, and the diggings in Rich Gulch. He fingered the fine yellow dust from a miner's poke. He walked the main streets and drank cold water from the community well. He met miners, cowhands, gamblers, preachers, and perhaps a gunslinger or two. That night a gala ball was thrown in his honor. Jacksonville's culture might have been limited, but the town was trying to do things up right.

Next morning folks gathered again as the president prepared to depart. Families traveled long distances for this brief look at him. As he was making his farewells, Madame Holt pushed forward. She boldly handed Hayes a bill for $120.00 for a night's lodging.

The President flushed. He was taken by surprise. "But my dear madame," Hayes stammered, "I most assuredly do not wish to buy your place."

"Mon Dieu!" the proprietress retorted, throwing up her hands. "You object to my price, monsieur? A gentleman like you? It ees a veree fine room you have. We go to much trouble, much expense. Look at zee wall paper, zee carpeting, zee furniture."

Hayes was visibly irritated. He started to reply, then turned expectantly to the crowd. There was a strained silence. All eyes were upon the president, but there were grins on the bewhiskered faces of the tobacco-chewing miners. They were enjoying Hayes's uncomfortable position. Somewhere during his visit he had lost their respect. No one stepped forward to pay his hotel bill.

Finally, the president directed an aide to settle with Madame Holt. He climbed stiffly into the coach, riding off without a last farewell.

The crowd stared after the disappearing coach. There were a good many guffaws as they dispersed to their homes and farms. It was an incident Jacksonville would never forget. Why had the town gone cold on the president?

Some said he acted like a stuffed shirt, stiff, formal and aloof.

Folks were disappointed in his brief public appearances. He didn't stay long at the ball. And Mrs. Hayes apparently insulted Madame Holt by refusing her wine, a symbol of hospitality to the French woman. A lot of little things, added up, didn't go over in the friendly Western community.

"He never did come back," reminisced an oldtimer, years later. "But then, maybe he didn't intend to anyway."

No other dignitary of Hayes's stature ever came to old Jacksonville, but the town didn't care. The gold played out, the railroad put the stages and freighters out of business, and in 1927 the county seat was lost to Medford. For years the town was forgotten to all but those who clung to it.

Then the late Ernest Haycox, the famed Western writer, made it the setting for his book "Canyon Passage," which became a successful movie. Interest was revived. Now thousands of tourists flock to this museum showplace to see its historic landmarks, including the United States Hotel. But no one is charged $120.00 for a night's lodging, even in these inflationary times.

OUT OF THE CHUTES

JUST about the last place you'd look for a cowboy is in the new state of Israel. And if you look, you wouldn't find many. Just one, in fact—though this cowboy is training other Israelis to follow in his footsteps.

Everything about Israel's number one cowboy—except his language and his background—would seem perfectly natural on a Western range. His name is simply George Adam, and he's a lean six-footer.

He comes from Yugoslavia, where he was a horse breeder before the war. In 1942 the Germans sent him to work in a copper mine in Serbia, but he escaped two years later and joined the partisans, who were fighting in the hills. In 1949 he came to Israel, hoping rather wistfully that he might find work on a farm, where at least he'd be close to work horses. Instead he was put in charge of the horses on the government's stud farm, and he's having the time of his life, with 54 mounts to train and exercise. Most of them are Arab stallions, though there are a few West Highland ponies, used for breeding working stock.

You'd be quite justified in calling this Israel stud farm a ranch, because besides the horses there are sizable herds of other animals, including 120 head of Syrian and Damascus cattle, and 270 sheep. There are chickens, turkeys and geese, too. All these animals are being bred experimentally to raise the standard of Israeli livestock.

The layout may qualify technically as a ranch, but it's the darnedest one you ever saw. Within sight is the medieval walled city of Acre, and the 500-acre range is cut through by an arched stone aqueduct, which was built in 1780 by a Turkish Pasha—who must have been known for other things besides his construction work, because he was called Ahmed Jazzar, the Butcher.

Alongside the aqueduct is a show ring almost as old, where the Butcher used to exhibit his prize horses. There George Adam puts on a show whenever he has a few minutes to spare from his chores, whether there's anyone to watch or not.

Usually there are some spectators, because the word has gotten around among the Israelis and the tourists. They watch wide-eyed as George thunders around the track on his beautiful Arab stallions, jumping them over hurdles and showing off tricks which would make them a popular act in a rodeo ring. They'll walk on their hind legs for George, and some can be coaxed into lying down and playing dead. Sometimes the attraction is a slow and patient horse-breaking session, though George does not encourage an audience for this. He believes in the persuasion method of training a horse to saddle, rather than the brute-force method.

Recently George has taken on a new job, teaching young men from the settlements how to handle horses.

They come to the stud farm in groups of ten, and stay for a month or two, until they have learned how to ride and how to run cattle on horseback.

During the first few weeks of their instruction they're a battered lot, fond of dining off the mantlepiece, but by the time they leave they're tall in the saddle and mighty proud of being cowboys.

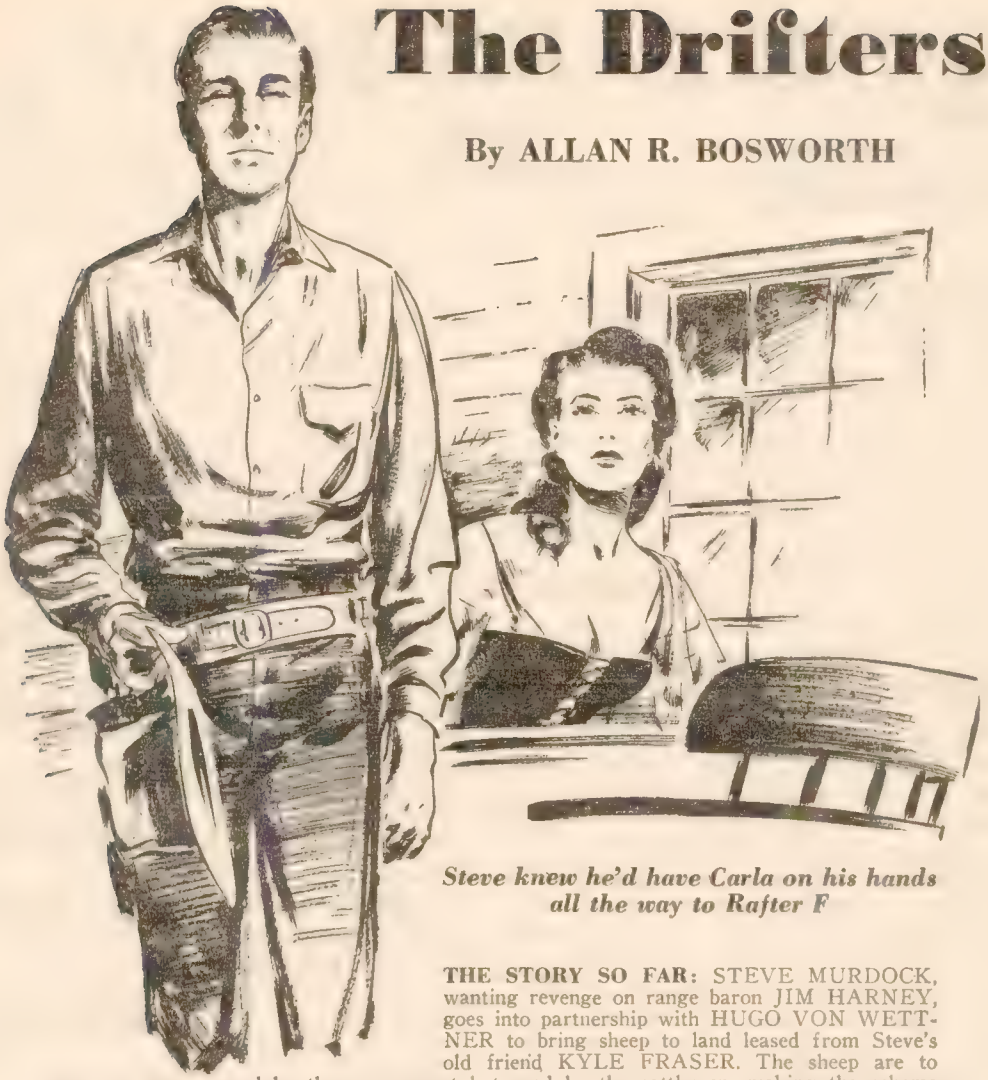
Any day now we'll probably be hearing about the first Israeli rodeo. And probably already people are hearing a shout echoing around the farms. Something like, "Hi-Yo, Kessef!" Kessef—as if you couldn't guess—means Silver in Hebrew.

Adios,

THE EDITORS

The Drifters

By ALLAN R. BOSWORTH



Steve knew he'd have Carla on his hands all the way to Rafter F

THE STORY SO FAR: STEVE MURDOCK, wanting revenge on range baron JIM HARNEY, goes into partnership with HUGO VON WETTNER to bring sheep to land leased from Steve's old friend KYLE FRASER. The sheep are to move on range owned by the government but used by the cattlemen, making the scheme legal but unpopular. Von Wettner is murdered and his sister, CARLA, becomes Steve's new partner. Harney and sheep-hating sheriff ARCH KENNEDY try to persuade her to sell out. Meanwhile Harney continues his empire building, buying stolen cattle through MARLIN DUBOSE and bringing pressure on the small ranchers, who are suffering losses caused by a long drought. But the ranchers—MASE SMITH, ED VALENTINE and BILL CRENSHAW—won't back Steve against Harney; they refuse to help when Harney's men start a barroom brawl with Steve. KATIE, an old flame of Steve's, now married to Harney's foreman BIG LEWIS, stops the fight.

PART TWO

STEVE MURDOCK rode slowly, nursing the soreness in his ribs, grateful for the coolness of night wind on his face. It was nearly midnight when he came to the flock, bedded down in the long valley seven miles west of town. Pablo was sitting by the campfire. "Senor, you are hurt!"

Steve squatted, grunting with the pain in his side. "It is not much," he said.

He smiled and sipped coffee while he told

the old Mexican what had happened. Pablo listened gravely, shaking his grizzled head.

"Then it is well that we keep the guard," he said. "About a mile down yonder, south of the railroad, is Harney's fence. Tomorrow, when we camp outside Rosario, it will be the same. We have not seen the last of his *vaqueros*, I think. And how long will we camp at the town?"

"I will be guided by your advice, Pablito."

"*Bueno*. Then we stay there four days. I think there will be feed enough for that time, and the windmill gives water—not like that one of Harney's but for free. Being heavy with lambs and having lost much weight from thirst, the sheep need to rest. And, senor, we need supplies."

Steve groaned. Mentally, he thumbed over the few greenbacks left in his wallet, and wondered if Carla had any capital. The purchase of supplies would leave him broke.

"All right, Pablo. I know the lambing can't wait, it'll happen in spite of everything. But this is a hell of a time to take on recruits! When will it be?"

"In about twenty-four or twenty-five more days. The lambs will start dropping about the twenty-seventh of March. For this, *no hay remedio*. It will take care of itself, being a natural thing. But I wish to speak of the shearing. It should be done maybe a month later, when all the little lambs have arrived. But then we will be far down by the Rio Bravo, in a country where there are no sheep. How, then, will it be possible to hire a shearing crew?"

"You're the expert, Pablo. Should we shear earlier?"

The old Mexican's face was worried. "It is not easy to say, senor. True, it has been a soft winter, and spring should be early and warm. But *quien sabe?* The weather in Texas is like a woman—nobody can say what it will do next. We will watch the sky, and listen to what the coyotes say in the morning before the sun rises. We will talk again about the shearing, Estevan."

He went to the wagon, and turned there thoughtfully. "About one more thing I am worried. That man Harney came here tonight with the so-pretty Senorita Carla. He is trying to talk her into selling the sheep for only half of what they are worth."

"I know," Steve said.

"But can she do this when you are in the partners?"

"Maybe. I didn't put up much money, Pablo, and now she owns much more of the sheep than I do. But I hope she won't listen to Harney."

Pablo sighed. "I hope this too."

The old Mexican climbed into the wagon to roll a cornshuck cigarette and resume his vigil, and Steve unrolled his bedding and tried to lie so that his ribs would not hurt. His thoughts whirled; too much had happened this day, and a lot more was bound to happen before the sheep reached Rafter F range. The stars had swung far down the sky before sleep finally came.

The next day was Sunday. They got the sheep off the bedgrounds while the dew was still on the browse, and trailed them along the stage road toward Rosario. In late afternoon they reached the public holding grounds in the mesquite flat two miles west of town.

Cattle herds had been held here, handy to the railroad loading pens south of the road, and the feed was scarce. But the sheep were finding morsels of soapweed and drought-burned grass overlooked by the cattle. Pablo was already here with the wagon, and had picked a camp site a little way from where the road dipped into the dry watercourse of San Juan Draw. Diego and Manuel moved the sheep on up to the public windmill on the edge of town, watered them, and brought them back at sundown, content.

But Steve was restless. If Carla allowed Harney to persuade her to sell the sheep, Harney would ship them out of the country. All Steve's trouble would be for nothing. He had to talk to Carla, had to have a showdown with her, and it couldn't wait. He walked thoughtfully into camp and saddled his horse Castizo.

Darkness had fallen when he reached the hotel. The clerk, baldheaded Fritz Hurlburt, stiffened expectantly behind the desk when Steve inquired for Miss Von Wettner.

"Well, you might find her in the dining room," Hurlburt said, "But I wouldn't go in

there if I were you. Jim Harney's talking to her."

Steve grinned, and jingled his spurs into the dining room. They were sitting at a table near the windows, and Harney's back was toward Steve. Carla was watching the door, the lamplight soft on the gloss of her dark hair. She looked prettier than he had ever seen her; she had dressed for this occasion, in a low-cut gown with a tight bodice, and it angered Steve that she had worn it for Harney. He checked this emotion with the counter thought that he didn't give a damn what she wore. Then she looked up and saw him. There was something clever, almost crafty, in her glance.

"Steve," she said warmly, "I'm glad you're here. Please sit down with us. Mr. Harney and I have been talking business."

JIM HARNEY turned stiffly, his ruddy face going redder. But he could smile at his worst enemy, and he was smiling now, turning on all his suave, charm for the girl, being as genial as he always was in business matters that could not be settled by the quick grab.

"Never saw a man I couldn't talk business with, and all personal feeling aside," Harney told the girl silkily, "but I don't understand the set-up. All the sheepherders I've known were hired hands, and Mexicans to boot. What's Murdock's connection?"

Carla saw the danger signal in Steve's eyes. "He was my brother's partner," she said quickly. "Now he's mine. I couldn't make any kind of deal without consulting him."

"You won't make a deal with Harney, now or later, if you ask me!" Steve said grimly. "Not unless you're anxious to come out on the little end of the horn."

He pulled up a chair, and Harney regarded him with sarcastic amusement. "Blaming me for your poor business management?" he asked. "Well, let's get one thing straight. You're not a common sheepherder. So, how big a share of the outfit do you own or control?"

"Enough to go on with my plans, even if Miss Von Wettner sold out. I own a third of the flock. That's a thousand ewes, Harney, and they're all going to lamb before we get to Rafter F."

"I've got money that says you'll never make it."

"Your money talks dirty. I suppose you've got money that says I'll be shot in the back."

"Stop it, both of you!" Carla cried. "I didn't come here to listen to this. I inherited the major share of the flock, and the lease on Mr. Fraser's range that Hugo paid for. I refuse to inherit an old quarrel between you two. It seems Hugo did, and it cost him his life."

"Let me tell you both something," Harney said, his smile gone. "Hugo von Wettner got shot in the back. I don't operate that way. I didn't do it, and I don't know who did! That's the gospel truth. Ask Arch Kennedy. That shooting's got him buffaloed."

There was a silence. Harney's voice had the ring of truth; the look on his face was the look of a man who wanted desperately to be believed. "Ask Arch," Harney said again. "I sure don't know. It happened down in the Bend, where it could have been an outlaw from either side of the river, or somebody just passing through. But why? Arch looked into it. He says Hugo wasn't robbed."

Carla said sweetly, "Supposing we believed you, just what is your proposition, Mr. Harney?"

Harney cracked his knuckles. "Wool has been selling at five cents a pound. I happen to know those sheep cost a dollar a head; your brother said so. I'll give you two dollars a head. You don't double your money every day."

"I don't think that's enough," Carla said, frowning. "Mr. Harney, what are you, a Democrat or a Republican?"

"What's that got to do with it? If it rains in Texas in September, as the saying goes, it doesn't make a damn bit of difference who's in the White House."

"It might make a difference this time. Lots of people think McKinley will be elected in the fall. If he is, the tariff will be put back on wool. Sheep will go up. We could make some money."

Steve and Harney both stared. This was

a new side to the girl. She had known nothing about sheep a few days before.

Harney's smile wavered; he made a gesture of annoyance. "That's a chancy risk, and you don't know what you're getting into. I'm trying to help. I'll raise the ante four-bits a head, but that's my top!"

Carla looked at Steve. "Two and a half a head. What do you think?"

"Let him keep his money," Steve said shortly.

"Mr. Harney," Carla said, "there has been a meeting of the board of directors. I'm sorry to say we won't sell for two-fifty a head."

"You're both crazy!" Harney exclaimed. He got to his feet, red in the face. "I'm damned if I'll pay more. And you'll wish a hundred times that you'd taken me up!"

He stalked angrily to the lobby. Steve, watching, said, "Man, oh, man, you sure put a cockleburr under his saddle! Where'd you hear that talk about McKinley and the wool tariff?"

"It's not just talk. Don't you read the newspapers?"

"Out in camps?" he said. "Not very often."

"Steve," she said after a hesitant silence, "I've got a proposition of my own. This partnership was an accident, and it'll never work. I want to buy you out."

"Buy me out?" he echoed, startled.

"Yes. I haven't got the money now, but I could pay you later—after the wool crop was sold, maybe."

"And who'd take the sheep to Rafter F? That's a man's job, sister! You don't belong on that drive."

Her eyes flashed. "I'm *going* on it, either as full owner or as a partner! Who made things tough? Not Hugo, certainly not I. What I said a little while ago is true. You dragged us into the old feud between you and Harney. That feud is the opposition we face."

"The cattlemen—" Steve began, but she interrupted.

"Harney runs the cattlemen. You're out to show him he can't rule the roost. I don't agree with your motives or your methods. If you're going to fight Harney, why didn't you stand up to him at the windmill? Pablo saved the sheep there. And you're not interested in sheep as a business. *I* am. Will you sell out to me?"

"I will not," Steve said flatly. "Furthermore, I'll hold to the original deal I made with Hugo. I'm bossing the drive. It'd be a lot easier if you didn't go along." He reached for his hat. "Think it over."

She was still sitting at the table when he left, and her mouth was a stubborn line. He knew then that he would have her on his hands all the way to Rafter F.

HE WOKE next morning with that problem uppermost in his mind. When he saw Pablo he mentioned it. "The *senorita* says she is going with the sheep."

Pablo's face lighted up, much to Steve's surprise. "Senorita Carla is going with us? That is good. She has a smart head, that one. Already she knows much about the sheep. Yes, it will be good to have her in the camps. I will cook for her, and Diego and Manuel will learn manners."

Steve rode to town later, and went straight to the abstract office. Carla was already there, pressing the clerk, Adams, into service by having him hold up a large sheet of tissue paper, while she made a tracing of the plats on the map. The gray-haired clerk looked guiltily over his shoulder, and relaxed when he saw it was Steve. Carla greeted him in a politely cool fashion, and by common consent neither spoke of the evening before.

"I was just telling Miss Von Wettner that she could get her sheep all the way to the Rafter F without having to cross more'n two or three strips of owned land," Adams explained. "Of course, it'd be a mighty crooked trail; you'd zig here and zag there. But—" and he grinned at his own joke— "what's time to a sheep?"

Steve grunted. He was secretly annoyed that Carla was doing what he had planned to do, and in a more practical manner. He wouldn't have thought of using dress pattern tissue paper for the purpose.

But he said to Carla, "The map will come in handy. Now that you're taking care of it, I'll run down to the store. Are you especially particular about where you sleep?"

Carla met his gaze levelly, but there were sparks in her eyes. "Yes, it happens I am. Why?"

"Just wanted to know if you needed a cot. The boys sleep on the ground." He grinned mischievously. "Of course the lizards and centipedes and tarantulas— "

"I'm really not so easily frightened," Carla interrupted. "Suppose we leave it to your judgment."

He added a cot to the list he had made up with Pablo that morning, and rode over to Harney's General Merchandise. A ramshackle wagon and scrubby team stood outside, the horses switching flies. Inside a tall stringbean of a man leaned against the counter across from one of the clerks. It was Walter Sims from down on the San Juan, thinner and poorer and older than he had looked three years ago.

"But I need a hell of a lot more'n ten dollars worth," he was saying. "You know I'm good for it. I'll settle the whole bill as soon's I can."

"Mighty sorry, Walt," said the clerk, opening a ledger. "Your account already runs ninety dollars, and it's three months overdue. Mr. Harney made the rule about a hundred-dollar limit. If you want more credit, you'll have to go to the bank and fix it up with him."

"And add it to the mortgage on my place? If it gets any bigger, he'll close me out. I have a family to feed."

"I have my orders," the clerk said. He closed the ledger. "Something I can do for you?" he asked Steve, and then recognition showed in his eyes. "Wait a minute—aren't you Steve Murdock?"

"That's what my folks always told me," Steve said bantingly. "Even so, I suppose you're open for cash customers."

"I have my orders about that, too," the clerk said. "Your money's no good. Mr. Harney said to tell you we're out of whatever you want." He saw the glint in Steve's eye and backed up so hastily he upset a stack of canned tomatoes. "Don't blame *me* for it!"

"If I blamed you," Steve said softly, "I'd haul you over that counter and mop up the floor with you. You're lucky I don't do it anyway!"

He jingled his spurs insolently out of the store, swallowing a rising anger. If he stayed, he would yield to the impulse to overturn the counter and kick the sides out of the glass showcase.

There was only one thing to do, and just time enough to do it. He caught the eastbound train to Sanderson, a hundred miles away. He prevailed on a merchant there to open up and sell him the supplies, to be shipped to the freight depot at Rosario. Then he took the westbound train back, and when he bought the ticket he broke his last twenty-dollar greenback.

The late-rising moon rode over his shoulder as he headed back to the camp on the holding grounds. Pablo challenged him from the wagon as he turned in from the stage road and skirted the sleeping flock. He gave the old Mexican a brief account of what had happened, then crawled wearily into his bedding roll and immediately fell asleep. The next thing he knew, Pablo's .30-.30 was cracking sharply, once, twice, and he jerked upright, his senses drugged with slumber, to hear yells and the furious barking of the dogs, and the roll of running hoofs.

"Senor! Estevan!" Pablo fired again, standing up in the wagon, the gun stabbing brief orange flame into the pale moonlight. "They try to stampede the sheep!"

Steve grabbed his boots and yanked them on before he was fully awake. There was no time to saddle. He moved toward the road, crouching low in the hope of skylighting a rider. It sounded as if there were three or four of them. Then a gun flash winked in the mesquites, and he heard the bullet glance whining from a wagon tire. Pablo fired again.

Two riders went past, a long pistol shot away, and Steve sent a blast after them. Wind blew a choking swirl of dust across the camp from the milling sheep, and more guns hammered through the dimness. He saw Pablo and Manuel running out to hold the flock, and cursed himself for not having armed the two herders. A bullet whipped through the foliage of a mesquite above his head; the raiders were shooting high, apparently bent only on scattering the sheep.

THEN a horseman took shape in the dusty moonlight, streaking in from the right, swinging his slicker and yelling in a high falsetto. Pablo's Winchester cracked, and Steve pulled his trigger, and felt the .44 kick hard against the heel of his palm in almost the same instant. The slicker flew out of the man's hand and caught on a mesquite; he grabbed his saddlehorn with both hands and swayed in the saddle as the horse veered off toward the road.

There were yells in that direction, and a rattling scatter of shots that came low, this time, one of them knocking over the blackened coffee pot in the campfire and sending up a cloud of fragrant steam. Hoofs drummed swiftly down the road toward Rosario, and the pandemonium faded until there were only the dogs barking and the herders calling reassurance to the sheep.

Steve went over to pull the yellow slicker off the mesquite. He brought it into camp, and Pablo put wood on the fire, but the slicker had no identifying marking. There was a hole through the spout of the coffee pot, but Pablo was already filling it with water and putting it on the coals to boil.

He looked at Steve across the smoking fire. "Estevan," he said slowly, "this way is no good. We should have fought them at the water tank when they killed the sheep; we must fight them now."

"I don't know," Steve said. "If we were driving cattle, we could drive them fast and fight our way through. But driving sheep, with Diego and Manuel walking, how can we stand them off? I am trying to use strategy."

But the wise old Mexican did not know the word. He shook his head dubiously. Then Manuel sounded an alarm from the mesquite.

"Senor, I think one of the *vaqueros* comes back!"

Steve heard the hoofbeats of a horse, and got to his feet. Pablo reached for the .30-.30 he had leaned against a wagon wheel.

"Are you there, Murdock?" It was Arch Kennedy's voice, angry and impatient. "I want to talk to you."

"Put the gun away, Pablo," Steve said. "All right, Arch. What is it this time?"

The sheriff rode up and ground-reined his horse by the wagon. He slid stiffly from the saddle. "You know damned well what it is. Who shot Red Bailey?"

Pablo and Steve exchanged glances. Pablo opened his mouth to speak, but Steve said quickly, "I did, if it was Bailey. I winged one man out of the bunch that rode in here and tried to spook the sheep."

"Winged him, hell! You drilled him through the belly, and he's in bad shape. I heard the shooting in town. I started out here, and met Harney's Two Seven boys riding in with Red. The way they tell it, they were just riding along the county road, minding their own business, and somebody opened up on 'em."

"Then they're liars, Arch. See this slicker? Bailey was fanning the sheep with it when he got hit. That was a good hundred yards this side of the road. You call that minding their own business?"

"Well, all I have is their word against yours," the sheriff said irritably. He glared at Steve from under his shaggy brows. "Damn it, I knew there'd be trouble—just nothing but trouble—the minute you brought the sheep here. Steve, I'm not against *you*, I'm just against sheep!"

"Pablo," Steve said, grinning, "pour the sheriff a cup of coffee."

Arch Kennedy squatted, sighing wearily. "I try to be fair," he said. "But I want you to know I'm sick and tired of this mess. I wish to God it was over."

IT TURNED unseasonably sultry for March. The tail fan of the public windmill swung listlessly, and the gleaming wheel was so still a man could count its blades against the burning brass of the sky. There was no breeze anywhere. Then the thunderheads came boiling up out of the southeast and towered majestically above the rimrocks. They were fat and dark with promise. It was going to rain, but not yet.

Marlin Dubose watched the dust from his shaded arbor. It came crawling out of the northwest, following the twisting course of San Juan Draw. He studied it with his

glasses, but could see nothing moving behind the screen of wild walnut that lined the dry stream bed. He watched it for two hours while it made tortuous progress through what had once been Steve Murdock's territory, and he frowned because Kyle Fraser or Ed Valentine might see the dust, too, if they happened to be high enough in the hills.

Now it swung off at an angle, going up a smaller arroyo that gullied down near the Four Corners from a little box canyon on Dubose's own land, some three miles from Candelilla. As if this had been a signal, he put down the field glasses.

"Maria! Saddle my horse. *Andale,* woman!"

The dust was gone by the time he rode into the rocky entrance of the box canyon. He whistled, and Bud Ketchum rose grinning from behind a clump of cedar, a saddle gun in his hands.

"You damn fools!" Dubose lashed out. "How come you're moving cattle in the daytime, on a day when there's no wind to thin the dust? I could watch you all the way down the San Juan. Somebody else might have seen you, too."

"The cattle are drier than the belly of a horned toad," Bud retorted. "We had to point for the river."

He fell in beside Dubose's horse. They passed a screen of cedars. Curly Ketchum was sprawled loosely in the shade of a tree, saddle under his head for a pillow, smoking a cigarette. Mitch Turner, a big man, redheaded and rawboned and restless, sat on a rock nearby and whittled at a cedar stick.

Beyond them were the stolen cattle, reds and duns and yellows splashed against the white-and-gray limestone walls that penned them on thee sides. Their hides were dusty in the sunlight, and dried sweat on their flanks showed they had been driven hard. They didn't look as if they had the energy to stray.

"Howdy, Marlin," Mitch greeted. "Got the money bags with you?"

Dubose grunted, studying the flock with a critical eye. "They look mighty gaunted to me. Is this the best you could find?"

Curly snapped away his cigarette butt. "You been around any cows lately? They're all gaunted as gutted snowbirds. What do you expect to get for twelve bucks a head?"

Dubose kneed his horse and rode around the thirsty bunch. They were mostly cows and calves, like Bud had said. A brand caught his eye.

"What the hell are you trying to pull on me?" he exclaimed. "You expect to get paid for this Two Sevens cow? What's she doing in this bunch?"

Mitch Turner whirled on him, clicking his knife blade shut. "You're damn right we expect to get paid for her. And don't try to tell us how to run our business! Suppose somebody else ran across this outfit and wanted to cut brands? It'd look kind of bad if we didn't have a Two Sevens or two in the bunch, wouldn't it? Come on, shell out! We don't aim to stay here all day."

Dubose met his angry eyes, and wavered. After all, it wasn't his money that was stocking Harney's new ranch in Coahuila. He rode back to the shade of the cedars and reached for his wallet.

AROUND noon, the dust cloud raised by the flock of sheep moved slowly down the county road and into the shanty-town outskirts of Rosario. Steve Murdock led the way on the coyote dun mustang. Into the beginnings of Main Street they flowed like the tongue of a dirty gray tide, their blatting complaint carrying far on the sultry air.

Jim Harney stood watching from the corner of the First National. Steve unconsciously straightened in his saddle, seeing him. Harney's gold-toothed smile was scornful. Beside him stood Oscar Poe, almost as pale as his celluloid collar. A few yards away, Big Lewis was just stepping down from the two red-wheeled buggy. Holding the reins, pink-faced, smiling, and waving openly to Steve, was Katie.

Steve lifted his hat to her, then looked the other way, down the side street toward the depot. Pablo had come in earlier and was there, now, loading the supplies into the wagon. He also had picked Carla up at the hotel; she sat on the wagon seat.

The dusty cavalcade crawled out Main Street into what was called Silk Stocking Avenue, past the homes cattle fortunes had built. The dust settled over the town square. Harney's clerks went back to their counters and ledgers; the idlers in front of the domino parlor rested their chairs in the shade and resumed their spit-and-whittle session. Jim Harney, they said, would not take this lying down. Later, Doc Moseley came by the bank carrying his little black satchel, and Oscar Poe went scurrying to the courthouse, a vengeful light in his eye.

Pablo and Carla caught up with the flock on rising ground two miles out of town, where the railroad tracks swung away to point for a pass in the rocky hills, and the road still ran alongside Harney's glistening wire. As they passed the sheep, they saw Arch Kennedy riding north of the road, out of the dust, his Indian paint horse in a fast trot.

The sheriff turned into the road a hundred yards ahead of the flock, and sat his saddle there, rolling a cigarette and waiting until Steve came up. "I'll take your gun," the sheriff said then. He looked at Steve over the match in his hand. "Right smart show you put on, wasn't it? There was only one thing wrong with it." His voice rose angrily. "While you were stinking up the whole town with this outfit, Red Bailey died!"

THOMAS JEFFERSON WALLACE had been county judge ever since the county was organized. He looked like a man sun-dried and tanned to leather in the saddle and, except for his string tie, was dressed as a cattlemen, even to the spurs he had worn up the Chisholm Trail in younger days. He seated himself now and donned a pair of steel-rimmed glasses. Arch Kennedy rapped for order. Half of Rosario was shuffling its boots in the courtroom.

The clerk read the charge, manslaughter in the death of Scott Bailey as the result of a gunshot wound.

Judge Wallace leaned forward. "Want a lawyer, Murdock?"

"Not now."

"How do you plead, guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty."

The clerk's pen scratched. Steve glanced over the crowd. These were the same people who had watched him drive the sheep through town and most of them wore an I-told-you-so expression. Jim Harney stood near the back wall, not smiling for once. Harney had been fond of Red Bailey.

Judge Wallace said, "Bound over for trial by the superior court, with bond fixed in the amount of five hundred dollars. That'll be in September, Murdock. Do you have five hundred dollars?"

A chuckle ran through the courtroom, and Arch Kennedy rapped again. Steve said, "No, I haven't. But I've got a bunch of pregnant ewes worth a lot more than that. They have to be looked after, and I'm not going to skip the country."

Judge Wallace shook his head. "Sorry, son. If you can't raise the bond, you'll have to pass the time in jail. That's the law."

He removed the steel-rimmed spectacles, whittled a chew of plug tobacco, and prepared to put his feet on the table. Arch Kennedy motioned to Steve, and the spectators parted to let them pass.

Kennedy opened the outside door of the two-story jail building and led Steve upstairs. "Jennie," he called to his wife, "you have a new boarder." Then he jingled a ring of keys along the corridor and opened a cell door.

Steve stretched out on the hard cot, even though he wasn't sleepy. His thoughts raced back over the afternoon. After Arch Kennedy had come for him, they had sat their horses for a moment by the wagon, while Steve told Pablo to take the sheep on without him; and all the time the flock was moving by with its dust and blether, moving in its plodding, patient, perhaps inexorable way.

Looking back, Steve wondered. Carla was dissatisfied with the partnership. This was her chance, and it was more than a chance, to close him out of the deal. September was a long way off, and nobody he could count as a friend had five hundred dollars.

He had found Ace Babb in the next cell, and now he listened to Ace's deep breathing and thought over what Ace had told him. The drought had forced Ace and the other

small ranchers on the San Juan to depend on a single waterhole. Jim Harney was too smart to claim the waterhole itself, but he had acquired sections of land on both sides of the draw and fenced from there to the steep rimrocks, in such a way that access to the water was blocked off. Then he tried to buy the small holdings, cheap. It was legal, in a sharp, inhuman way.

Ace's soft drawl had quickened and taken on an angry edge. "So I came to town and laid for him. You know something, Steve? It's mighty hard to shoot a man unless you can make him go for his gun. Harney's got nerve, all right. He knew where he was—in his own town, with his flunkeys all around—and he just stood there and skinned his teeth in that eighteen-carat grin. He wouldn't pull his gun. Maybe he wasn't packing one. All at once I had to get my hands on his windpipe. I did, too, but Big Lewis and a couple of others ran out and pulled me off. Now I wish I'd shot him!"

Ace had already served thirty days of a sixty-day sentence for assault and battery, with nobody to pay his fine. As far as he knew, Walter Sims was still trying to hold on by hauling water all the way from the Rafter F. The others had sold their cattle. Joe Collins was working for Bill Crenshaw on the Bar L, for thirty a month. The Tate brothers were scratching for a living with a freight outfit.

"Wait till I get out of here!" Ace went on. "I'll organize 'em. They want to get even, any way they can!"

Steve thought, and I won't be there to help or to see. It's going to be a long time till September."

CARLA listened to the lonesome wind. It was in every wrinkle and fold of her clothes, chafing her skin; the food at supper had sand in it, and everything she touched felt gritty. The wind moaned through the mesquites and whistled around the tent; the inexhaustible sand swished softly against the canvas, making a sound like rain.

All this was new and strange and, suddenly, unbearable. On paper, in a reasonably comfortable hotel room, proprietorship of a flock of sheep had seemed desirable; on a crawling, jolting wagon, in the dust of the blatting flock, the neatly penciled figures blurred, and the hardships became real. Her father had been an Austrian aristocrat. She hardly remembered him, but she had led a sheltered life—until now.

This was the third day out of Rosario. Pablo had pointed the flock for a waterhole on state land, not far from the county road and only two miles from the northwest corner post of Two Sevens pasture. More wire stretched eastward through the mesquites, but it was not Harney's; it marked the northern limit of Mase Smith's Diamond Dot. Like many another rancher, Smith had fenced more land than he actually owned.

The wind rushed through the thickening, sand-filled dusk. It was everywhere, shrieking around the wagon, tearing loose a corner of the tent fly, drumming the canvas savagely against the ridge pole. A fine dust filtered through the tent, and she felt as if she were smothering. Anything was better than the oppressive smallness of the tent, and she tied on her sunbonnet and went out to the fire, where Pablo squatted, with a blanket around his hunched shoulders like a *serape*.

"I can't stay in the tent," Carla said. "I can't stand it! I wish I were back in Rosario—back home—anywhere!"

Her voice trembled on the edge of hysteria, and Pablo nodded understandingly. "Yes, it is always that way when a woman first goes with the sheep. I was married once, and I have seen it many times. But if her man goes, what can a woman do but follow?"

"That's different. I haven't got a man."

"Even if you do not yet have a husband, there is Estevan. He is your partner."

Carla flushed. "I didn't ask for that partnership."

"But he is a very good man, that one, and more important to the sheep than any of us. I will go back to Rosario and tell them I shot this *vaquero*. But they will believe Estevan before they will believe me. In that case, you must pay the money for the fine. What else could a partner do?"

"But I haven't any money. I don't know

anybody with money!" Carla cried. In her desperation, the thought had been in her mind all day rose to the surface. "The only way to raise enough money is to sell my part of the flock. Then I could go home. I wish I'd never seen the sheep; I wish I'd never heard of them!"

"You would sell to Senor Harney?" Pablo asked in a stricken tone. "You would have him laugh behind his hand?"

"No." She remembered her brave show at the hotel, her cleverness in drawing Harney out.

"No, not to Harney. But he planned to sell the sheep in Val Verde County. I could do the same."

Pablo got to his feet and called into the blowing dusk. "Manuel! Have you found the wormy ewe? Bring her to the fire." Then he looked at Carla, shaking his head. "No. I think there must be another way to solve this problem."

Manuel came up, dragging a stumbling, bleating ewe by a hind leg. She had cut her back on the wire at Harney's windmill, and the sultry weather had brought blowflies. The herder threw her down by the fire and knelt on her, holding a doubled foreleg, while Pablo poured chloroform into the wound to kill the maggots, then swabbed it out with a rag on a stick, and dusted it with dry sulphur. Carla turned away, feeling sick.

"*Pobrecita,*" murmured Pablo. "That will be better. Look, senorita. Do you see this fleece?"

She forced herself to look. The ewe was an ugly, dirty, bedraggled creative, far gone in pregnancy, belly swollen and flanks thin, nose running, eyes glazed with pain and fright, throat quavering in terror. Pablo parted the thick wool. Under the greasy outer scum, matted with cockleburrs, it was a rich, creamy white.

"This little one's coat weighs four pounds, maybe more," Pablo said, as if describing a thing of beauty.

"Before long it must come off, and it is worth something. Also, senorita, it is well known that men can be swayed by a pretty woman. In these things there may be a remedy for our troubles."

ACE BABB was standing at a barred window overlooking Main Street. Suddenly he said, "Uh-oh, here comes the best-looking gal west of the Pecos, Katie Lewis!" He turned suddenly. "Say, she's coming in the jail, and I know it isn't to see me."

Steve got up from the cot. Katie wasn't being smart. The respectable ladies of the town would hear of this, and there was no telling what Big Lewis would do. Then Jennie Kennedy unlocked the door at the head of the stairs, and Katie came in with her free-limbed stride, her head defiantly high and color in her cheeks.

"I brought you a couple of novels," she said, "and a chocolate cake."

Steve pulled the only chair into his cell. "Katie," he told her, "this isn't a good idea. Does the cake have a saw in it?"

"My recipe didn't call for one. Besides, you wouldn't run away if they left the door open. I wish you would. Harney's got you right where he wants you. What are you going to do?"

"Stick it out. What else can I do?"

She said, "Well, I've got a couple of hundred dollars, if—"

"You keep it, Katie, but I'm much obliged. You'd better not come here again."

"Harney's been out to the camp, Steve. He figures this is where the partnership busts up. What'll happen if Carla runs out on you?"

"I don't know," he answered uncomfortably.

Katie stared. "You mean she hasn't been here all week? She hasn't even come in to see if you needed anything?"

Ace Babb coughed loudly. He made signals Katie didn't see. Then the door chain rattled authoritatively, and she rose from the chair.

There was a brief, awkward silence. Jennie Kennedy, red-faced with the embarrassment one woman feels for another, said, "Steve, Miss von Wettner has to see you now. She's taking the four-thirty train."

Carla wore the dove-gray traveling suit and the stylish flat-brimmed straw hat. Her complexion had suffered a little, despite the sunbonnet, but she looked as if she came from

anywhere but a dusty, wind-swept sheep camp. Her trim appearance was the last straw to redheaded Katie Lewis.

Bursting into tears, she fled. Steve drew a deep breath, relieved that there had been no hair-pulling, surprised that, unlike Katie, he felt no anger toward Carla. He had expected this.

"You sold out?" he asked without accusation. "You let Harney beat you down?"

"No, it isn't Harney. It's—well, everything. I've had plenty of time to think. The only way I can help is to leave. Pablo thinks perhaps the wool could be sold now, but he admits it's a slim chance. There's one sure way, Steve. I can find a buyer, back in sheep country. If I sell the whole flock, you'd have a little money toward a new start. If I sell only my share, you'd have a thousand ewes left, and I'd lend you the bail money. Which should I do?"

"I won't sell," he said stubbornly, "and I won't take your money. If you find a buyer, tell him to come and see me here. I'll borrow five hundred on my share."

"Miss von Wettner," Jennie called from the stairs, "it's a quarter past four."

Carla rose. "I wish you'd let me help you," she said softly. "I wish a lot of things were different. Good-by, Steve."

She went out without looking back. When she got downstairs, a contrite Katie Lewis was waiting in the red-wheeled buggy. "Get in," Katie said huskily. "I'll drive you to the depot."

"Thank you," Carla said. She seated herself, and Katie shook the reins over the horse and looked at her sidewise.

"Maybe I'm beginning to understand you," she said frankly. "I didn't at first. You're in love with Steve Murdock."

"I'm no such thing. Why, I never even dreamed of it!"

"If you haven't, you will," Katie assured her. "But you'd better help that man, or you'll lose him."

ON SATURDAY evening the jail population was increased by one. This was a long-limbed, slim-waisted Mexican, who wore sideburns and a devilish moustache.

"Hola, hombres," he greeted Steve and Ace, with a breath that smelled like a saloon. "I am Jesus Ramon Onate, the best damn shearer north of the Rio Bravo. And you?"

"Just a couple of *pelados,"* Ace said.

Steve jerked erect on the cot. "Wait! What shearing crew?"

"Why the one of Senor Cox, from Del Rio. The season has not yet started, but there is a very special job."

"Here? East of town, by the waterhole?"

"Where else, *hombre?* It is the only flock of sheep in this country. We came by the train two nights ago, and yesterday with my shears I undressed more than a hundred little ones. As I have told you, I am the best damn shearer north of the Rio Bravo. *El capitan* will not let me stay in this place. He will come tomorrow and pay me fine. I am necessary to the shearing."

"A moment, Jesus. I am interested in these sheep. Do you know how it came about that Senor Cox would send a crew so far?"

The Mexican smiled. "Yes, I think so. There was a pretty woman who came to talk to Senor Cox. She owns the sheep, but she has no money. She wept, and what could he do? It is not always good business to buy the wool you shear, and I am given to understand that Senor Cox is paying six *centavos* the pound. But, as I have told you, this woman is very pretty."

"And did she return to the sheep camp?"

"Yes, she is there. She is what the gringos would call a straw boss. Let the shears make one little cut in the hide, and Senorita Carla is the one who calls loudest for the *tecolero,* and sees that the sheep is doctored at once." He thought for a moment. "Ordinarily, I do not like it when a woman is the boss. But when one is pretty, it is not so bad."

Next day Arch Kennedy held open the barred stairway door. "Come on," he said, jerking his head at Steve, Ace Babb and the shearer. "This place has to be aired out. It's beginning to smell like sheep."

"You playing a joke, Arch?" Ace asked suspiciously.

"It's no joke. Carla put up cash bond for all of you."

A few hours later, back at the camp, Steve

swung into his saddle. The sheep were moving out, gray shadows in the gray light of earliest dawn, eager to feed while the dew was still on the weeds and the brown grass. Manuel and Diego pointed them south, letting them take their time.

There's no hurry, Steve told himself. Early or late, the cattlemen will be waiting and watching for us at the Diamond Dot wire.

He rode slowly out through the stunted mesquites, studying the flock with a grim satisfaction that amounted to pride. They were breaking camp at the waterhole. This was where Harney had figured the partnership would bust up, where the drive would fail. There was pleasure in proving Harney wrong.

Carla was climbing to the wagon seat, looking a lot different than when she had visited Steve at the jail to say good-by. She wore a blue workshirt and a pair of man's blue jeans, and her face was brown. Pablo said she had worked as hard as anybody at the shearing.

Steve saw Pablo looking anxiously at the lightening sky. The old Mexican had been walking out from the campfire at night to study the stars; he had been up early, listening to what the coyotes had to say about the weather. Yesterday he had heard a coyote howling on the rimrock after sunrise. As everybody knew, that meant it was going to rain.

It had been late last night when Castizo, fat and short of wind after two weeks of idleness and grain feeding, brought Steve back to the camp. Ace Babb had gone his way alone, heading into the Bend, uttering a promise to organize the men who were being exploited by Jim Harney. There had been a council by lantern light, with Carla tracing a route on the county abstract map.

Steve remembered Pablo's gnarled brown finger drawing a line across the paper. Pablo could not read the writing on the map, but the waterhole and the railroad oriented him.

"Here is the camp, senor, and here there is fence. It belongs to Senor Smith. But I have been told that he only grazes this land; he does not own much of it. If that is true, then at this place there is a gate."

[Turn page]

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It was true. The map showed that Mase Smith actually owned only ten alternate sections. The sheep were pointed for that gate now. They were heading for a showdown on the right to pass through state land.

Carla had said nothing about her talk with Katie Lewis on the way to the depot. She only explained to Steve that she had decided to a plan of Pablo's. She had left the train at Del Rio, inquired about shearing outfits, and found the man named Cox. She had argued that the price of wool could go no lower and was bound to rise; that nobody else was ready to shear in advance of the season, and that the idle crew might as well be put to work.

"I don't think it was that that won him over," she said. "It was the idea of helping get sheep started in the Bend. He claimed he'd lose money on this clipping, but if other sheep outfits came into this country he'd make it up later."

The flock had sheared an average of four pounds to the head, just as Pablo had predicted. That made twelve thousand pounds of wood, at six cents per pound—seven hundred and twenty dollars. To Steve, it sounded like a pile of money. You couldn't make that much out of a herd of beef steers and still own them.

"Keep books," he told Carla. "I owe you five hundred, and the fifty you put up for Ace."

Her level eyes met his in the lantern light. "You don't owe anything. We charge that up to operating expenses."

And there was still a little money left from Carla's deal with Cox, that would come in handy when they needed more supplies.

THE sun came up just as the feeding flock straggled to the top of a rise about a mile south of the waterhole. Another mile down in the gray-green mesquites, Steve saw stretches of wire glistening. He made out the Two Sevens corner post, where Harney's land and Mase Smith's Diamond Dot came together. The gate was a little to the left of the corner, marked by twin brown threads of a little-used wagon road, and in the angle formed by the two fences stood a chuck wagon.

It was an unlikely spot for an overnight camp, with a waterhole such a short distance away. Steve let Castizo crop a few mouthfuls of grass while he studied the layout. Four or five horses were in sight, on stake ropes, and smoke was rising from the breakfast fire; and now two men could be seen moving around the wagon with the attitude of men who had all day. Mase Smith had been expecting the sheep.

Nobody's in a hurry, Steve thought. He looked back over the busy, scattered flock. They were swollen like poisoned pups, pregnant as all hell. I wouldn't be surprised to see the lambs start dropping any minute, Steve thought. We couldn't drive the sheep fast if we wanted to.

He went forward with Castizo in a walk. A half mile out in front, he could hear the sheep blatting, and he knew the Diamond Dot crew would hear them, too.

They were saddling up as Steve crossed the stage road and turned down the rutted wagon trace in the brown weeds. He recognized Mase Smith himself, standing in a blocky fashion, boots planted wide, looking as immovable as a boulder. He saw an Indian paint horse being led around the wagon, and even before the man cinched his saddle and turned, Steve knew Arch Kennedy was there. It figured. Kennedy hated sheep.

Steve lifted his voice and called, "Hello, the camp!"

Smith looked up, his heavy face showing nothing. He and Kennedy mounted and came riding to the gate. A man talked better in the saddle. The other two appeared, a Mexican wagon driver and a lanky, leathery-looking cowhand. They swung into their saddles and separated, moving a little way out along the Diamond Dot fence on either side. Steve smiled to himself. Mase Smith must have given them previous instructions; he was taking no chances of a repetition of what had happened at Harney's windmill, where the sheep had come under the wire.

Smith spoke first. "Murdock, if you're figuring on coming through Diamond Dot land, you might as well turn back and save yourself a lot of trouble."

"Wasn't figuring on doing that, Mase," Steve said amiably. He took the folded map

out of his pocket. "I've got your ten sections marked off here. We aim to drive the sheep down along the Two Sevens fence. We won't leave a single hoofprint on your land."

Mase Smith shot a quick glance at Kennedy. "This is Diamond Dot, all the way south of the stage road."

"That's not what they say in the county abstract office," Steve countered softly. "Your ten alternate sections are five or six miles over to the east, and you own the water rights on Conejo Draw. Everything between there and Harney's fence is school land, belonging to the state of Texas."

"I've grazed it for ten years!"

Steve put the map away. "But you weren't as smart as Harney. He bought his land. Running stock on a piece of range doesn't make it yours. Ask Arch."

While Smith and Kennedy stood watching with their mouths agape, Steve kneed the coyote dun up to the gatepost. The unpainted lumber gate was hinged at the farther end, and secured to this post by loops of baling wire at the top and bottom. Steve leaned from his saddle to reach the upper loop.

"Don't touch that wire, damn you!" Mase Smith exploded.

Steve smiled disarmingly. "Well, there are other ways."

He pulled the bone-handled .44 from his holster. It was a quick, clean draw that took both Smith and the sheriff by surprise. He could have shot both of them before their guns were out, and the knowledge that he could do it showed in their frozen, shocked reaction.

"Stand back, boys!" Steve warned, and pulled the trigger.

Kennedy's horse shied at the crash of the gun. Cedar bark flew from the gatepost, and the upper loop dropped to the ground, shot neatly in two. Another shot cut the lower wire and threw up a little geyser of dirt. The sheriff's horse acted up again, and the gate swung open on creaking hinges.

Mase Smith came alive then. "You can't do this!" he shouted. "This is trespassing. Arch, arrest him for trespassing!"

[Turn page]

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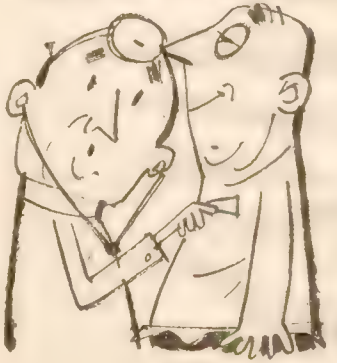

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Arch Kennedy said, "Well, now, I don't know about that," and then stiffened in his saddle. Four horsemen were riding up on the far side of the Two Sevens fence—Jim Harney, Big Lewis, and two of the Two Sevens hands.

More than anything else could have done, this gesture of interference decided the sheriff. He said, "As far as I can see, Murdock may have the right to pass through state land, like he says. If you want to fight it, I reckon you'd have to ask Judge Wallace for an injunction."

Then he walked his horse over toward the Two Sevens corner, his shaggy eyebrows meeting in an angry frown.

Jim Harney greeted him sarcastically. "Morning, Arch. Are you and Mase letting the sheepherder bluff you down? Maybe you're scared of him, but I'm not."

"You keep out of this," Kennedy said heatedly. "What are you boys doing over here anyway? It's not your land."

"It damn well is on this side of the fence. And I'll ride anywhere I please, any time I feel like it!" Jim Harney retorted.

The sheep were already streaming through the Diamond Dot gate. Mase Smith sat his saddle there, his heavy face a study in conflicts. He was a solid man, and not one to go off half-cocked; he found it hard to understand or accept what was happening here. This land had always been as good as his; this grass certainly belonged to his cattle. And now these damned sheep were beginning to spread out and eat it.

Steve Murdock sat on his horse on the other side of the blatting stream. The last pregnant ewe went through. The wagon followed in the dusty wake. Carla and Pablo had heard the shots without knowing what had caused them, and there was alarm on the girl's face. Steve gave her a broad wink.

Then he got down off the horse, shut the gate, and secured the wire loops. "Good as new, Mase," he said cheerfully. "See you down the line."

"Mase," Harney called, as Steve started out to overtake the sheep, "come here a minute. What the hell got into you?"

They conferred briefly over the fence. Looking back, Steve heard Harney's voice raised in remonstration. Then Smith made an impatient, angry gesture, and spurred away. Maybe, Steve told himself, that was good. Maybe it was the first crack in Jim Harney's support.

JIM HARNEY, heading back for Two Sevens in late afternoon, was not easy in his mind. He had left Big Lewis in charge, loudly ordering him to shoot any sheep that strayed under the wire. He could depend on Big, but Mase Smith's attitude was something to watch. Mase had always been a slow thinker, and maybe a little afraid of the law; he had let Murdock get the jump on him with that talk about the right of passage, and Arch Kennedy hadn't helped.

These attitudes might prove to be cracks in the structure Harney had built; if so, there were ways to deal with them. Kennedy would have to go; Harney was already considering choices of an opposition candidate for sheriff. He took comfort in the knowledge that Ed Valentine would not be so easy. If Ed or any of the other ranchers turned chickenhearted, there were ways of showing them who was the kingpin in the Bend.

There were three campfires that night, and if the air was not neighborly it at least appeared peaceful. So Arch Kennedy went back to town. Pablo was on guard as soon as supper was over, and in a little while he challenged a man approaching the camp on foot.

It was Mase Smith. He had found time to brood, and now he strode into the firelight to speak his mind. "Look here, Murdock. You only made about six miles today. I sure as hell don't like that. I agreed to let you come through here, but that doesn't mean you can keep those sheep on my grass all month!"

"It doesn't mean I can rush them, either. They won't handle that way. Sheep have to be nooned, and you can't drive them fast."

"You ever try a little persuasion?" Smith asked, and stalked back to his own camp.

What he meant by persuasion was brought out late the next afternoon. The drive was passing slowly through rugged hills and brushy canyon country. Steve had ridden ahead a couple of miles to scout for water along a

white-brush draw. He found a waterhole and turned back, and then the wagon came careening around the rocky point of the hill, with the little Spanish mules in a gallop. Pablo was not in sight. It was Carla who was clinging to the lurching seat.

She was white-faced, but steady, when she drew the wagon to a stop. "Smith's men lost their patience and closed up behind the sheep. They tried to run them through that last rocky stretch, using quirts and ropes. Pablo warned them to stop, but they wouldn't listen. The flock started scattering, going every which way, and all Pablo and the herders could do was to keep them from running into Harney's fence. You'll have to do something!"

"I'll do something, all right," Steve said angrily. "You go on to that white-brush draw. Wait by the waterhole."

She said, "Please be careful, Steve!"

Then he was riding for the shoulder of the hill, taking a short cut. As he reached the rocky crest, he ran into a small bunch of bewildered, bleating ewes losing themselves among the boulders. The farther slope and brushy stretch below was the scene of disorganized rout. The Diamond Dot riders, beginning to sweat over the enormity of their error, were multiplying the confusion by pounding saddle leather all over the area, trying to pull the flock together again.

"Round 'em up, damn it!" Mase Smith shouted, from somewhere down in the brush. "Get 'em back on the trail. Dark's coming!"

Steve swore, and let Castizo pick his way down the rocky slant. Darkness was coming on, indeed, and not all the cowboys in the Bend would be able to throw the flock together before the light faded. These sheep were not accustomed to being herded by men on horseback; they did not understand the *come-a-ti-yi-yippee* tactics which had suddenly been applied.

"Get 'em over here into this open spot!" Mase bawled. "Bring 'em here and we'll hold 'em until we get the others out of the brush. Where's Murdock?"

Steve found Mase by following his voice. Smith was still on his horse, watching a bunch

[Turn page]

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of fifty or a hundred sheep huddled against the chaparral. His stolidity was gone.

He sputtered, "Damn it, Murdock, the sheep are all over the place! They have no sense at all."

Steve swung down from the saddle, a dangerous light in his eyes. "Listen to me. You stampeded the sheep. You'll damn well help throw 'em together again, or they'll be on your grass for weeks. And you won't round them up on horseback, Mase. It'll be on foot, sheepherder style. You ready to start now?"

"All I want to do is get 'em off my land," Smith said sullenly.

Steve scowled fiercely. "I could have you in court for this. I could get a judgment for every sheep we lose. Are you ready to pitch in and help?"

Mase Smith had experienced some brush with the courts in the past; he was afraid of the law. "I was just trying to get 'em off my land," he said again, and drew a deep, resigned breath. "I'll bring the rest of the boys over from the home ranch."

THE night was nearly moonless. Gray sheep, gray boulders and gray brush clumps blended into a formless wash of landscape, and by midnight their combined efforts had accounted for only about half of the scattered flock. Steve called off the hunt then. He left Manuel and Diego to guard the roundup, and he and Pablo went to the wagon.

They found a surprise. Carla had set up the camp by the waterhole almost as well as Pablo could have done. Her tent was pitched, but she was still up and waiting. She had the lid of the chuck-box down. A cook fire was going, and the stomach-searching aromas of coffee, freshly-baked skillet bread and hot *frijoles* greeted them.

"If you don't watch out, you'll be a top hand yet," Steve said.

She flushed as if she had just heard a compliment. He rode back to the roundup with food for the herders before he ate, and when he returned to the camp the coyotes were howling. Both he and Pablo knew what that meant, but there was nothing anybody could do.

It took all of next day to round up the rest of the sheep. The Diamond Dot cowboys had begun to limp before the sun was high. Smith had brought over four other hands, including Adair, his foreman. They went on foot through the tangled chaparral, and trudged over the rocky hillsides, finding little scattered bunches of sheep huddled in canyon and flat and draw.

They walked in high-heeled cowboy boots not designed for walking, and by noon they were literally dragging their spurs. They sweated and swore; they hated sheep more than ever, and cursed them, and still brought them in to the central tally point just north of the waterhole.

Carla had climbed on the wagon and was watching the roundup. Then sudden movement on the far side of the cut bank caught her eye, and she was in time to see the trouble that broke as sharply as the snapping of a too-tight fiddle string. A little group of ewes, smelling the water, had broken away from the outer fringe of the flock and were trying to take a short cut, instead of obeying their usual herd instinct. Adair ran after them, his feet hurting. He headed them off, and aimed a kick that caught one on the side of the head and sent her sprawling.

Diego ran up, concerned. "Do not kick the sheep, senor," he protested. "The sheep do not understand that."

Adair glared. He was the foreman here; working with sheep, on foot, was beneath him. Mexicans were beneath him. "Don't tell me what to do, greaser," he retorted. "Keep your trap shut, or I'll kick *you!*"

He towered threateningly over Diego, who was part Yaqui and feared nobody. Diego put his hand on the hilt of his knife. Adair pulled his gun. The Mexican grabbed his hand, and Carla screamed as they swayed back and forth as if wrestling Indian style. The gun went off just as Steve Murdock hit his heels against Castizo's flank and sent the dun horse plunging through the scattering, blatting flock.

Dust boiled up in his wake, half concealing the scene, making it unreal. Diego was sitting on the ground, his right leg extended. He gripped it tightly just above the knee, and blood showed dark between his fingers. Steve left his saddle in a twisting leap that drove Adair to earth. When both regained their

feet, Steve had the gun and was pistol-whipping the foreman savagely with its barrel.

The first blow knocked the man's hat off; the second sent the front sight of the gun raking down his face, bringing blood. Carla screamed and covered her eyes. But she could hear. She was near enough to hear Adair grunt, animal-like, with the pain.

That was Mase Smith yelling in a high, frantic voice, "Don't kill him, Murdock. For heaven's sake don't kill him!"

Then there was one more soggy thump, as the gun barrel lashed against Adair's shoulder. When Carla looked again, Steve was standing over the Diamond Dot man, breaking the cartridges out of the gun cylinder.

Steve had tried to bring the sheep into the Bend by peaceful means befitting a shepherd; he had argued with simple insistence on his rights under the laws of Texas. He had attempted, patiently and stubbornly, to avoid trouble—and there had been nothing but trouble since that night when Carla first met him.

It was plain, now, that his patience finally had been exhausted, and that from here on to the Rafter F the drive would be a fight, with no quarter asked and none given. Carla climbed over the back of the wagon seat and began rummaging in her tin trunk for something to tear into bandages for Diego's leg. As the excitement faded, she felt a warm, intense pride in Steve Murdock.

(To be continued in the next issue)

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 80)

1. Wyoming.
2. No. Although both are short-tailed wildcats, the lynx is larger, less spotted, and ranges farther north than the bobcat, which is also sometimes called lynx-cat.
3. Texas.
4. Steer roping.
5. Coldest in Yellowstone National Park, hottest in Death Valley National Monument.
6. Half Spanish, half-Indian.
7. New Mexico, which has had 113 governors.
8. (1) wolf, (2) buffalo, (3) antelope, (4) rabbit, (5) jackrabbit, (6) prairie dog, (7) mountain lion, (8) rat or mouse, (9) badger, (10) deer.
9. The toe is split, with two claws, used as a comb.
10. California.

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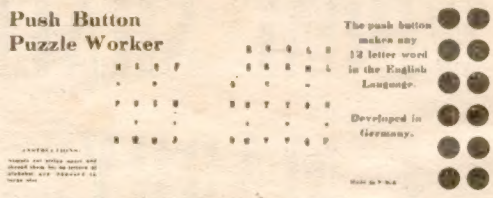

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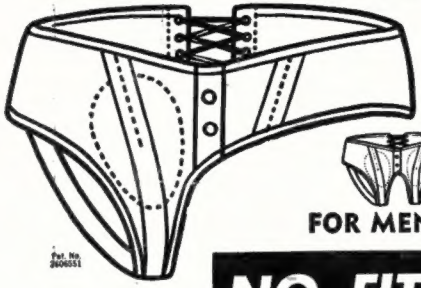

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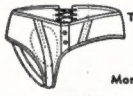

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